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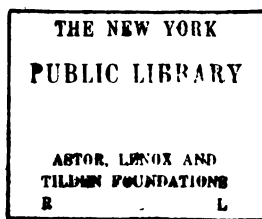
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Oh, but he was a man!—a match for both of us almost

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CADETS OF GASCONY

Two Stories of Old France

BY

BURTON E. STEVENSON

AUTHOR OF "AT ODDS WITH THE REGENT," "A SOLDIER
OF VIRGINIA," "THE HERITAGE," ETC.

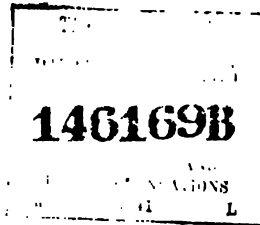
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F.

TO THE
SPIRIT OF YOUTH
OF WHICH MAY WE ALL
PARTAKE

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MARSAN

A ROMANCE OF THE MIDI

CHAPTER I

I CHANCE UPON AN ADVENTURE

IT was at the corner of the Rue Gogard that I saw her first. You may, perhaps, recall the place, if you know Montauban. A great barrack of a building, time-stained and neglected, blocks the way as one turns into it from the Rue Pluvois. Before the house is a high wall, pierced by a single gateway. The door is of oak, four inches thick and heavily barred with iron,—Vincennes has few stronger,—wherefrom it may be seen that he who built the structure was a man who had his enemies.

The door held my eye, as I turned the corner, by its very massiveness, and just as I reached it, it was flung open with a crash, and a girl rushed into the street. She stopped as she saw me standing there, and my hat was sweeping the pavement as I caught her eyes on mine.

“You seem a man of honor,” she said, and

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pressed her hand against her breast as though to calm the beating of her heart.

"A thousand thanks, Mademoiselle," I answered, and I saw that even the stark emotion which possessed her could not bemask the beauty of her face. "Believe me, I shall be most happy to prove it."

"You have a sword?" she asked, still eying me with attention.

I threw back my cloak and touched the hilt.

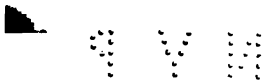
"And know how to use it?"

"Try me, Mademoiselle," I said simply.

The color swept back into her face and her eyes narrowed with sudden resolution.

"Then follow me, Monsieur," she said, and turned back through the gateway.

I was at her heels as she ran across the little court and plunged into a dark doorway beyond. I paused an instant to draw my sword, dropping my cloak that it might not cumber me, and then clattered up the stair behind her. It was dark and narrow and of many turnings, so that she, who knew the place, had reached the top while I was stumbling along midway, cursing the darkness. But she awaited me, and as I reached her side held out her hand to



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me. My own closed over it in an instant and found it soft and warm and trembling. Here was an adventure after my own heart, and I had had so few adventures!

"Cautiously, Monsieur!" she whispered, and led the way along a narrow hall to the right. The darkness was absolute, the atmosphere close and stifling. I began to wonder if I had walked into a trap, but that warm little hand in mine reassured me. Besides, who could know my errand from Marsan, and, not knowing it, who would set a trap for so small a bird as I? Then, suddenly, as we turned a corner, I heard the sound of angry voices and saw a light streaming redly through an open doorway. In a moment we had reached it, and I paused in astonishment as I saw what lay within.

There was a great fire blazing on the hearth, which threw into sharp relief a bed with disordered hangings, an open desk with papers overflowing from it to the floor, a chair overturned, even the faded tapestry upon the walls. But it was at none of these I looked, though I found them all bit into my memory afterwards. It was at a man bound to a chair, at two others who were glancing hastily

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through the papers they were pulling from the drawers of the desk, at a fourth who was making an iron turn white in the glow of the fire. The man in the chair was watching the door with agonized eyes, but of the faces of the others I could see nothing, for they were masked.

Even as I stood there, palsied by astonishment, the man at the fire drew forth the iron and turned with it sputtering in his hand.

"Come, M. le Comte," he said, "I think this will answer," and he advanced towards the prisoner.

But the girl was through the doorway ere he had taken a second step.

"You curs! You cowards!" she screamed, and ran at him as though to wrench the hissing iron from his hands.

Her voice had loosed the chains which bound me, and I sprang after her, drew her back with one hand, and while the man stood for an instant agape at this intrusion, ran him through the breast. As he felt my sword in his flesh he raised his hand and threw the iron full at me, but I stepped aside and avoided it, and he fell in a heap on the hearth. The others were upon me almost before

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I could turn, and with the suddenness of their rush drove me into a corner, where, in truth, I was very glad to go and get my back snugly against the wall. The moment I felt their blades against my own I knew I had swordsmen to deal with. For a breath I held them off, then I saw them exchange a glance, and as one knocked up my blade, the other ran me through the shoulder. It had been my heart, but that I sprang to the right. In the instant that followed I saw my chance and thrust full at my opponent, who had left his breast uncovered, but my point rang against a net of steel and the blade shivered in my grasp.

"Well thrust," he said, laughing harshly. "'Tis a pity so pretty a swordsman must die so young. Come, Gaspard, let us finish," and he advanced to thrust again. I had my poniard out, but knew it would be of little service.

And then, as I steeled myself for this last attack, commending my soul to the Virgin, I saw a white arc of sputtering iron sweep through the air and hiss deep into the cheek of the man in armor. He fell back with a terrible cry, and, dropping his sword, clapped his hands to his face. The other stood for an instant dazed, then, with an oath,

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caught up his companion and plunged into the darkness of the hall without. I heard his footsteps echoing along it for a moment, then all was still. Only the girl stood there with the bar of iron still in her hand.

"I thank you, Mademoiselle," I said. "In another moment I had been beyond assistance."

She smiled at me faintly, tremulously, and cast the iron down upon the hearth. Plainly, she was not used to scenes of violence, and had small relish for them.

"Come," I continued, "let us release the prisoner," and with my poniard I cut the ropes which bound him. He arose from the chair unsteadily, stretched his limbs, and looked at me with a good-humored light in his eyes.

"In faith, Monsieur," he said, "you arrived most opportunely. I admit I have no appetite for white-hot iron. I am a man of the pen, not of the sword. Accept my thanks," and he bowed with a certain dignity.

I bowed in return, not to be outdone in courtesy; then, of a sudden I felt my strength drop from me, and sat down limply on the chair from which I had just released him.

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"Oh, you are wounded!" cried the girl. "See, uncle, here in his shoulder," and before I could prevent it she had sunk to her knees beside me and was tearing away my doublet. In a trice my shoulder was bare, and she examined the wound with compressed lips, touching it with intelligent fingers that bespoke her convent training.

"It is nothing," I protested weakly. "A mere flesh-wound. Do not trouble about it, I beg of you, Mademoiselle. I shall be better in a moment."

But the man interrupted me.

"Nonsense!" he said curtly, and he too looked at the wound. "Claire," he added, "bring a basin of water and clean linen. We will soon repair this damage."

I followed her with my eyes as she ran to do his bidding. So her name was Claire, and I repeated it over and over to myself, as a man rolls wine in his mouth to get the full flavor. She was soon back, and the wound washed clean and deftly bandaged.

"There," he said at last, "I think that will do. I do not believe the hurt a dangerous one, Monsieur, but you would best consult without delay a more skilful surgeon than either Claire or I. One

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thing more I can do for you," and he opened a cupboard in the wall and brought out a flask of wine. "Drink this," he said, and handed me a glass brimming over. I drained it at a draught—how good it tasted!

"A thousand thanks," I said. "I am quite myself again. I trust Mademoiselle will pardon my momentary weakness."

She smiled happily as she looked at me.

"Oh, yes, Monsieur," she answered softly; "I think I could find it in my heart to pardon a much more serious offence," and her face grew rosy with sudden blushes, in fear, doubtless, that she had said too much. I could guess that she had seen little of the world, and that its strangeness frightened her.

Her companion forestalled me before I could find words for a reply.

"May I ask the name of our rescuer? We shall wish always to remember it with gratitude."

"Paul de Marsan," I answered simply.

He started, and I saw the girl's face turn white.

"Liege to the Comte de Cadillac?" he asked quickly.

I bowed.

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"I came to Montauban to see him," I said, wondering at his emotion.

"But must you see him?" he persisted.

"At the earliest moment."

He waved his hand with a gesture of despair and stood for a little time, his head bent in thought.

"M. de Marsan," he began at last, "I fear we have done you ill service by calling you here to-day——"

But I stopped him before he could say more.

"Ill service!" I cried. "Ill service to give my sword a chance at three consummate scoundrels, and me an opportunity of meeting Mademoiselle! Do me a thousand such ill services, Monsieur!"

His was a merry spirit when no danger threatened, and I saw a jest spring to life in his eyes.

"A chance to meet a thousand pretty girls?" he asked.

But he was not to catch me so.

"On the contrary, a thousand chances to meet Mademoiselle," I answered boldly, though the boldness was no deeper than the lips, and from the corner of my eye I saw the girl blush hotly.

He glanced from me to her and back again.

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The mirth died out of his face, as heat from a bed of ashes, and left it cold and gray.

"I fear that may not be, Monsieur," he said gravely. "Our way is not your way, as you will soon know for yourself. But, at least, I can give you a friend in place of the one you have lost here in our service."

He signed to Claire, and she ran to an adjoining room, returning in a moment with a sword in a scabbard of stout leather.

"Gird him," he said.

She came to me shyly, and taking the old scabbard from my belt, clasped the new one there. I trembled at the touch of her fingers, and gripped my hands behind me to keep my arms from about her. I could see the red blood surging in waves over cheek and neck as I looked down at her, but only when she had finished the task did she lift her eyes to mine for an instant. What eyes they were—dark, lustrous, with the white soul looking out!

"Draw your blade," commanded the other.

As I obeyed and its polished sides caught the firelight I saw it was no ordinary weapon.

"Test it," he said.



She came to me shyly

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I bent it to left and right. It gave in my hands like some living thing.

"'Twill take a stout coat of mail to turn it aside," he said. "'Tis a Toledo."

I flushed with joy at possessing such a treasure and tried to stammer my thanks, but he cut me off.

"There, there," he said, not unkindly. "Keep your thanks. I doubt you will soon find you have little enough cause for gratitude. But 'tis the utmost I can do for you, for 'tis very unlike we shall ever meet again."

"But your name," I stammered. "Surely I may know your name."

He hesitated a moment, then shook his head impatiently, as though casting some weakness from him.

"My name is of small moment," he said. "You may call me Duval. That will serve as well as any other."

"But, Monsieur," I protested, "I hope to see you many times again—you and Mademoiselle," and I stole a glance at her, but her eyes were fixed on the floor.

Duval came to me and took my hand.

"Believe me, M. de Marsan," he said earnestly,

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"I honor you and value your friendship highly, but for your own sake you must not meet us again. Indeed, 'twill do you little good to try, since by tomorrow we shall be far from here, in a country it were death for you to penetrate."

I gazed at him, too astonished to reply.

"I will ask you one more favor," he added. "Will you assist me in carrying yonder fellow to the bed? We must give him a chance, if he hath a spark of life left in him."

"Willingly," I answered, and between us we raised the man, who lay where he had fallen, and stretched him on the couch. He gave no sign of life and I thought him done for, but when the doublet was stripped from his breast I saw that the blood was still slowly oozing from the wound which my sword had made. Duval hesitated an instant and then lifted the mask from his face. I had never seen the man before, but he had a strong, bold countenance, with something of rough power in it.

"That was the master against whose cuirass you broke your sword, M. de Marsan," remarked Duval, and then as he met my inquiring glance he added, "Believe me, I appreciate your courtesy,

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Monsieur, in keeping back the questions which must be on your lips; but 'tis a matter you are ignorant of, even were I at liberty to explain it. And now I must ask you to leave us, for we have much to do."

"We will meet again," I said earnestly as I took his hand.

But he merely shook his head.

"Claire will accompany you to the street," he said, and turned away to his disordered desk.

I followed her without a word along the hallway and down the dark stair; but at the foot I caught her hand and held it.

"Can it be, Mademoiselle," I asked, "that this is adieu? Surely you do not believe so!"

"I fear I must believe so, Monsieur," she answered softly. "Only I wish myself to thank you for your gallantry and courage. They were given to a good cause."

"And will be given again to the same cause!" I cried. "I warn you, Mademoiselle, that I shall not submit so tamely to this decree of separation."

She pressed my fingers gently and withdrew her hand.

"Come," she said, "I must return," and she

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went on across the little court and to the gate, which still hung open as we had left it. "Adieu, Monsieur," she added, and held out her hand again.

I raised it to my lips and kissed it.

"It is not adieu," I said. "I will not have it so. I shall see you again many times," but as I looked into her eyes I felt my certainty slipping from me, and with it my self-control.

Perhaps she read my thought, for she drew her hand away and made ready to close the gate.

"Adieu, Monsieur," she repeated, and I saw that her eyes were bright with tears.

I sprang to her and caught both her hands in mine.

"But, Claire," I cried, "at least, tell me that you are sorry; tell me that you care; tell me that you would not have it so!"

She looked up into my face and her lips were quivering.

"I have had many disappointments," she said. "One more will matter little. You must go, Monsieur. To detain me here is to endanger both of us."

"As you will," I said, a little bitterly, and I dropped her hands and turned to the gate. "Only

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in this, Mademoiselle, you shall not be disappointed. I swear it. Au revoir."

I stepped through to the street and turned with bared head and trembling hands for a last glimpse of her. For an instant she held the gate half open and gazed into my eyes. Then she shut it fast, the bar dropped into place, and I heard her footsteps slowly cross the court.

CHAPTER II

I WALKED INTO A HORNETS' NEST

THE vesper bell of a near-by priory waked me out of my thoughts. I remembered with a start that the business which had brought me to Montauban was as yet undone, and I hastened my steps towards the hotel of the Comte de Cadillac, which stood, as I very well knew, on the right bank of the Tarn, as one approaches it from the south along the Rue du Midi. It was not till then that the increasing cold of evening drew my attention to the fact that I no longer had my cloak about me, and I remembered that I had not thought to pick it up again as I passed the place where I had dropped it, so absorbed had I been in my companion. I reflected with satisfaction that I had chosen an old one in which to make this journey, not only that I might be the less an object of notice, but also because I did not know to what vicissitude of weather I might be subjected ere I was back again beside the fire at Marsan.

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Night had settled upon the town before I reached the Rue du Midi and turned up towards the river, but I did not slacken my pace until I saw gleaming before me the great torches which at night-time always flamed on either side the wide gate to the Hotel de Cadillac. Far in the distance, beyond the high-arched bridge which spans the river, I could catch the glitter of light about the great château of my master's friend and ally, M. le Comte de Toulouse; and away, on either side, the warm lights of the town; but I paused for only a glance at them as I turned towards the gate before me. There was the usual crowd of lacqueys and men-at-arms loitering about it, and I made my way through them without hinderance, across the inner court, and up the steps to the great doorway. Here a sentry stopped me.

"I wish to see M. le Comte," I said. "I have an urgent message for him from Marsan."

The fellow looked me over for a moment, plainly little impressed by my appearance.

"Very well, Monsieur," he said at last. "Come with me."

Midway of the hall a group had gathered about a man who was talking excitedly, and from the

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faces of his listeners I judged it to be no ordinary bit of gossip he was imparting. I caught a few words as we made a way through the crowd.

"It is most curious," the speaker was saying. "No one can imagine how it occurred."

"What is it?" I asked my guide when once we were past the crowd. "What has happened?"

But he merely shook his head, as though it were not his business nor mine, and kept on without replying. I promised myself that I would some day repay him twice over for his insolence. The blood is warm at twenty!

He turned to the right through an open doorway and stopped before a man who was walking soberly up and down, his chin in his hand, his brows knitted.

"M. d'Aurilly," he said, "here is a youngster who says he has a message for M. le Comte."

My cheeks flushed at his tone, and I bit my lips to keep back the retort which would have burst from them.

D'Aurilly stopped abruptly in his walk and looked at me.

"That will do, Bricet," he said to the sentry after a moment, and stood looking at me until the

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sound of his footsteps died away down the corridor. I could see that he was searching me through and through, and no whit abashed, for I come of as good blood as any in Gascony, I gave him look for look.

"So you have a message?" he asked at last.

"Yes, Monsieur," I answered, and as I looked into his face I saw that his eyes glittered under half-closed lids, that his nose arched like an eagle's beak, and that the thick moustachio could not wholly conceal the cruel lines of the mouth. Verily, I thought, there seem to be few pleasant people in the household of M. le Comte de Cadillac.

"And where is this message from?" he continued.

"From Marsan, Monsieur."

"And you are?"

"Paul de Marsan, Monsieur."

He looked at me yet a moment, his eyes glittering behind their veil of lashes like snakes in ambush.

"Very well," he said abruptly. "Give me this message. I will deliver it to M. le Comte."

And he held out his hand.

"Impossible, Monsieur," I answered. "I was

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instructed to deliver it only to M. le Comte himself."

Again he paused to look me up and down, and I saw the hot color of the south leap to his cheeks.

"Perhaps you do not know that I am the Vicomte d'Aurilly," he sneered at last.

"I heard the sentry call you so, Monsieur," I answered, bowing. I did not add that I thought it strange he should be in the household and seemingly so near the person of M. le Comte—for his estates lay far south on the border of the Pyrenees, and had always been reckoned more Spanish than French.

"Come," he cried roughly, "enough of this play! Give me the message. M. le Comte is ill and will see no one."

"Then I will wait till he is well again, Monsieur," I said, as calmly as I could, and made for the door, head in air.

But his voice arrested me.

"Stop, you fool!" he cried.

I turned upon him, all my blood in my face.

"That is not the way one gentleman addresses another, Monsieur," I said between my teeth. "I must ask Monsieur to apologize."

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"Apologize!" he cried, purple with rage. "Upon my word, these Gascon paupers are insufferable!"

But I could bear no more—no Marsan could endure an insult such as that—and I sprang upon him and struck him full in the mouth with my open hand. He had his poniard out in an instant and lunged at me,—which I thought a cowardly thing, —but I stepped back out of harm's reach and whipped out my sword before he could strike a second time. He paused when he saw my point at his breast.

"Now," I said, "perhaps Monsieur will draw and fight like a gentleman, not like a black-guard."

I thought he would choke with rage. And at that instant an inner door opened and a man stepped through. He stopped in amazement as he saw our attitude.

"What is this, d'Aurilly?" he demanded sternly. "A duel—and in M. le Comte's antechamber? Surely you know his need of quiet!"

D'Aurilly turned to the newcomer, his face working with passion.

"I was pressed beyond endurance, M. Le-

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tourge," he said. "Look at this," and he pointed to the mark of my hand still on his face.

"A blow!" and Letourge looked at me wrathfully. "Who are you, Monsieur, that you dare strike the Vicomte d'Aurilly?"

But my blood was up and my eyes were full on his. In my heart I knew that his eyes were honest eyes and his face an honest face, albeit a stern one.

"A gentleman whom he had insulted, Monsieur," I answered proudly. "We of Marsan permit that from no man."

But Letourge's face had changed. He stood staring at me with starting eyes, as though not able to believe them. Then he pulled himself together and his face became like marble, lighted by two coals of fire.

"You are a bold man, Monsieur," he said at last, in a voice that chilled me, "to set foot in this house. Methinks you will never leave it with your breath in your body."

It was my turn to stare.

"Is M. le Comte de Cadillac a second Pharaoh," I asked, "that he should slay his messengers? Had I known that, I had made less haste from Marsan in his service."

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Letourge had recovered his self-control, but I saw that his hands were trembling.

"From Marsan?" he repeated. "And when came you from Marsan?"

"An hour ago," I answered.

"And you have a message?"

"Yes, Monsieur."

"You liel!" he cried. "You must think our memories marvellous short! M. le Comte does not slay messengers, but he hangs spies. Do you not already feel the rope about your neck?"

I looked into his eyes and saw he was in earnest. What could the man mean? I realized that I had need to keep my wits about me.

"Monsieur," I said, with what calmness I could muster, "you have used words to me which you will some day regret. I am Paul de Marsan and no spy. We of Marsan have been liege to Cadillac for two hundred years and have always aided them to fight their battles. I come to warn M. le Comte of a great danger which threatens him, but seem to have fallen into a nest of madmen."

Letourge looked at me with working lips.

"Think not your tongue can save your head," he sneered. "You have come to the end of the

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journey. Will you lay down your sword, or shall I call in a dozen lacqueys to take it from you?"

There was but one course for a gentleman to choose. I glanced desperately about the room. He and d'Aurilly stood between me and the door into the outer hall. There was only one other, the door through which he had entered.

"Monsieur," I cried, "I shall not lay down my sword until my hand is powerless to hold it!"

With a cry of rage he sprang towards the hall to summon aid, while with one bound I was at the other door, and felt with joy that it yielded to my touch. As I slammed it shut behind me I saw that it had a bolt on the inner side, and shot it into place just as those without threw themselves against it. It could hold but a few moments at the most, and I cast my eyes about the room for some way of escape.

I saw that I was in a sleeping-room, the great, curtained bed occupying one side. A single candle burning on a table near it illumined the room but feebly, yet there was light enough to show me a window opposite the bed. I ran to it and threw back the shutter with a crash. The window was barred. I glanced again about the room. There

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was no other window—no other door but that by which I had entered, and which was already creaking under the blows rained upon it. I must die here, then, like a rat in a trap. Well, I would not die alone!

“What is this?” cried a voice from the bed. “Name of God! Did I not tell you, Gaspard, that I wanted quiet? Are you pulling the house down? Answer me, man!”

The curtains were jerked apart and a face appeared between them—a horrible face, swollen and bandaged. He listened a moment to the blows and cries without, then got unsteadily to his feet and took a sword from the chair at his bedside, cursing softly to himself the while. And as he turned his eyes fell upon me.

“Who are you?” he demanded. “What do you here?”

A spark of hope sprang to life in my breast.

“I am Paul de Marsan,” I explained. “I have a message for M. le Comte de Cadillac.”

He sat down heavily upon a chair.

“Very well,” he said. “I am he. But that does not explain this cursed uproar.”

My hat was off and I was on my knee before him

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in an instant. Perhaps here I should get justice. The door was already splitting. I had need to speak quickly.

"M. le Comte," I cried, "believe me, I am your faithful and devoted servant. I have journeyed fifty leagues to bring you a message of great moment to your house. Yet, when I came here and asked to see you that I might give you this message, I was called a spy, set upon, and threatened with the gibbet."

"But why—why?" he asked.

"I do not know, Monsieur," I answered.

He looked me for an instant in the eyes.

"M. de Marsan," he said, "I believe you. Get behind my chair. I will protect you from these fools."

It was time. Even as he spoke there came a mighty crash against the door, as of a heavy log hurled upon it, and it leaped from its hinges. The mob poured into the room, headed by d'Aurilly and Letourge. For an instant, in the semi-darkness, they did not see me standing there behind their master, then they were upon me with a yell of rage.

But M. le Comte was out of his chair, his sword advanced.

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"One step more," he cried, "and I strike! Letourge, d'Aurilly, you shall answer for this with your necks! Are you mad?"

The mob stopped on the instant. Plainly they knew that when their master struck, he struck home.

"He is a spy, Monsieur!" cried Letourge. "He hath come hither to assassinate you—to complete the work he began in the Rue Gogard!"

M. le Comte started round upon me, his eyes wild with passion. He snatched the candle from the table and thrust it near my face, his lips a-quiver. He held it a moment so, and then set it down again.

"Liar and traitor," he said, in a voice shaking with rage, "what bravado brought you here I cannot guess, or what hope you could have had that once my hand was on you, you could escape my vengeance!"

I stood staring at him with open mouth. Had he too gone mad?

"Were it not for this wound which crazes me," he went on after a moment, "I would have you hung this instant. But I myself am hungering to see you kick your life out at a rope's end, so we

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will defer that pleasure till to-morrow. Take him, men!" he added, and stepped suddenly away from me.

They came on with a yell, and I had but time to slash open the face of the first one, when they had me down, and I thought for a moment would tear me limb from limb. But their master quieted them with the flat of his sword as he would have quieted a pack of hounds.

"To the lower dungeon with him!" he cried, and stood watching as they dragged me away, his hands to his face, his eyes dark with pain and rage. I would have spoken even then, and the words might have saved me, but that d'Aurilly clapped his hand upon my mouth, and with a curse bade me hold my tongue. Out into the hall they dragged me, using me more roughly now that they were from under their master's eyes, and down a long flight of steps. At the stair-foot they paused a moment and I heard the rattle of bolts. A door was clanged back and I was pitched forward into the inky pit beyond.

CHAPTER III

I FIND THE KEY TO THE PUZZLE

I LAY for some time where I had fallen, nursing my bruises and reflecting with bitterness upon the singular gratitude of princes. I was dazed by the suddenness, the unexpectedness, of it all. What had I done that I should be treated so? And then, in a breath, a flash of light broke in upon me and brought me to my feet. What was it Letourge had said, "He will finish the work he began in the Rue Gogard." The Rue Gogard—but that was where I had met Claire. Could it be that it was Letourge and M. le Comte whom I had resisted there; that it was into the face of M. le Comte himself that white-hot iron had seared? I shuddered as I recalled the hiss of the iron into his flesh, the smell of burning, his cry of agony! Small wonder he should thirst for vengeance! Death on the gibbet would be merciful beside the torture which he had suffered and which he must suffer still.

I sat down again to think it out. Yes, there

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could be no doubt of it—I had been blind not to see it before. The man in armor had been styled “M. le Comte” in Duval’s room; he had called his companion Gaspard, and it was Gaspard whom he had cursed from his bed. Gaspard, of course, was Letourge. And then Duval’s despair when I had told him who I was—oh, there could be no doubt of it! And, in a flash, I saw the full peril of my position.

Here, then, was I, Paul de Marsan, about to be hanged by order of the Comte de Cadillac, whose family we of Marsan had served faithfully for two centuries and more, and whose favor I had thought to win. It had remained for me to be the first to betray him—though how was I to know?—and to be the first of the Marsans to die with a rope about his neck. I saw tumbling about my ears all those pretty castles in the air which I had spent so much time in building while floating along the Midouze or taking a lesson with the sword from old Maitre Perigneau, who had tested his art by my father’s side—and my grandfather’s, as well—in a hundred combats. It is not a pleasant thing when one is only twenty, with a heart warm for adventure, to see just ahead the end of the path—and such an end!

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More shaken than I cared to own, I rose again to my feet and determined to find out the nature of this place into which I had been cast. Perhaps I might yet escape, and M. le Comte would be less vengeful once his wound had healed.

The cell was not large, as I discovered by feeling my way along the walls, all of great stones, delicately fitted,—ten feet square at the most,—and the low, iron-studded door the only opening. Plainly, I could not go out until that door was opened, and the path from it to the gibbet seemed like to be a short one. I stood for a time leaning against it; at last, overcome by weariness and despair, I sank into one corner and dropped into a troubled sleep.

Then, of a sudden, I awoke to feel my wrists seized by iron hands and twisted behind me. I struggled till my heart seemed like to burst, certain that this was the end, but those great hands clung to me and would not be shaken off.

“Hold him so,” a voice whispered, and the hands tightened.

I lay still, the sweat starting from my forehead, waiting the blow that would end it. A hand tore the doublet from my breast,—there was a moment's

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silence broken only by the crackling of a paper,—
then the voice whispered again,—

“Strike him!”

A great blow fell upon my head.

I opened my eyes to find a tall fellow bending over me and dashing water into my face. Another stood near-by holding a torch. A flare of light came from the doorway, and I heard voices and the clank of arms without.

“He’s coming round,” said the fellow with the torch, seeing my eyes open. “He must have struck his head when we pitched him in here. Lucky for us his skull is thick. Again, Blatot.”

And the other deluged me again with water.

I sat upright, sputtering, dazed, suffocated.

“What is it?” I asked, so soon as I could get my breath. “Do you wish to choke me?”

“No, we’ll leave that to the hangman,” answered Blatot grimly. “Just now we are to take you before M. le Comte. I advise you to go quietly.”

“I will go gladly,” I said, for I had feared another answer. Besides, now that I held the key to the puzzle, I might find a way out. “Lead the way.”

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They fell into place about me and we toiled up the steps to the hall above. As we reached the stair-head I saw it was full day. Down the hall we turned, into the room where I had first met d'Aurilly, and across it to the chamber beyond.

It was crowded with M. le Comte's retainers, and they must have got some wind of my adventure, for a hum of anger greeted my entrance. M. le Comte himself was seated in a great fauteuil, his face still bandaged, but seemingly giving him less pain than it had the night before. D'Aurilly stood beside him, and he smiled maliciously as he noted my torn and disordered clothing, drenched with water, and the bruises on my head and face. Plainly he had not forgot that blow on the mouth—at which I did not greatly wonder, for neither should I have forgot it.

"M. de Marsan," said M. le Comte, when I stood before him, "I have had you brought here in place of ordering you straight to the gallows that you may answer certain questions I have to ask of you. 'Twill be wise on your part to answer them fully and truthfully."

"I shall be glad to answer every question Monsieur may please to ask," I answered, overjoyed

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that he should begin so mildly. "I shall be only too happy to tell Monsieur everything I know."

"That is well," and his brow cleared a little. "You may perhaps yet save your neck. Now answer me. Where was it you last saw the Duc de Roquefort?"

"M. le Comte," I answered simply, "I have never in my whole life seen the Duc de Roquefort."

His brow contracted and he brought his hand down with a crash upon the arm of his chair.

"By God! M. de Marsan," he cried, "you seem to set small value on that head of yours! You will be denying next that it was you who came to the rescue of that cursed, cowardly henchman of his, Brissac, just when I had him where he must have given up certain papers. You will be denying that it was you who spitted Bastien, who caused me to suffer this wound across the face," and he pointed to his bandaged cheek with a terrible gesture that sent the blood back to my heart.

"I deny nothing, Monsieur," I protested, "but I beg you to believe that I did not know it was you I was resisting or your enemies I was aiding."

"M. le Comte," broke in d'Aurilly, with an evil

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light in his eyes, "has not this farce gone far enough? Why keep this liar longer from the rope?"

"Why, indeed?" repeated M. le Comte, looking at me darkly. "Do you persist in your denials, M. de Marsan?"

And then of a sudden I remembered the message. With feverish fingers I sought to draw it from my bosom—it was not there! In a flash I understood—the assault in the dungeon, the tearing of my doublet, the rustling of a paper!

"It has been stolen!" I cried hoarsely, my throat on fire. "Some one has stolen it from me!"

I caught d'Aurilly's eyes on mine, and my heart grew hot with hate as I marked the sneer on his lips.

"What hath been stolen?" demanded M. le Comte impatiently. "No tricks, M. de Marsan!"

I clinched my hands to still their trembling, until the blood started beneath the nails.

"M. le Comte," I began, "hear me to the end. I came to Montauban from Marsan as fast as horse could carry me that I might place in your hand a message which concerns you deeply. You know what my reception was, but you do not know that

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after I had been thrown into yonder dungeon someone crept upon me while I slept and tore the message from me. See, here is where I carried it. You have a traitor in your house, Monsieur!"

His face was red, and I could hear the stir in the circle of men-at-arms behind me. Only d'Aurilly laughed harshly.

"A pretty story!" he cried. "A brazen lie! Does not your patience near an end, M. le Comte?"

But I looked only at my master. Surely he must see that I spoke truth!

"M. le Comte will remember," I concluded, "that I told him of this message in his sleeping-room, but he would not hear me out. The one who robbed me must have known I carried it, yet I told no one save yourself, the sentry at the outer door, M. Letourge, and—the Vicomte d'Aurilly."

I was looking full at d'Aurilly now, and I think he read the meaning of my look, for his face went white, and I could see his hand gripping his sword-hilt. And in that instant I knew who the traitor was!

"Good God, M. le Comte!" he burst out, "do you permit us to be insulted by this scoundrel?"

But my master waved him to silence. His face

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was very stern and his voice cold as steel when he spoke again.

"You make grave charges, M. de Marsan," he said; "so grave that either your head or another's will fall. Do you know the contents of this message?"

"I do, Monsieur," I answered, and I saw d'Aurilly go white again. "I have been trying to tell it you. I learned it by rote that I might repeat it in case I was intercepted and so compelled to destroy it. I had not foreseen it would be stolen from me at my journey's end."

"Well, repeat it then, man!" he cried, moving in his seat uneasily. "Out with it!"

"M. le Duc de Roquefort," I repeated, "'has learned of the presence of Madame la Comtesse at the Château de Cadillac, together with Mademoiselle, her daughter. He has learned also that not above thirty men can be mustered to defend the place. He designs to carry it by surprise and to take prisoner Madame and Mademoiselle, confident that with them as hostages he can secure certain concessions from M. le Comte. There is need of haste!'"

I could hear the crowd behind me breathing

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hard. A murmur of rage and astonishment ran from mouth to mouth, and I caught the rattle of a hundred scabbards as hand fell to hilt. M. le Comte was trembling with emotion.

"And the signature!" he cried, bending down from his chair till his eyes glared into mine. "The signature!"

"I know nothing of the signature," I said. "It was not given to me."

"But whence came the message? Prove to me that it is genuine—that it may be believed!"

"M. le Comte," I said, as calmly as I could, for the blood was beginning to sing in my ears, "permit me to tell my story. Three nights ago a stranger rode up to Marsan. He bore the message which I have just repeated. My father, who recognized the messenger by some secret sign which I know nothing of, ordered out his horse at once that he himself might bring it to Montauban. But my father is growing old, as you know, Monsieur; besides, in cold, wet weather his wounds trouble him greatly. I begged that I might come in his stead. I was eager to be of service to our master—to prove to him my loyalty and address. At last my father yielded. I should have his horse. The

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stranger gave me the paper sealed. He repeated to me its contents—three, four times, until I knew them word for word. Then he sprang to horse and disappeared in the night. Five minutes later I was on the road to Montauban. By noon of the next day I had reached the Losse, and here I was compelled to stop to rest my horse. Evening saw me en route again. At midnight I reached Comdan; dawn found me at Lestoure. An hour's rest, and I pressed on. At noon I had reached the Garonne. I forded it, and thought soon to reach Montauban, when, of a sudden, my horse fell lame. He grew worse at every step, until he was no longer able to proceed. There was no house in sight, so I left him by the roadside and hastened on afoot. As evening came I entered Montauban from the west."

I paused a moment at what I had yet to tell.

"Yes, yes!" cried my listener. "Continue; and then?"

"And then, M. le Comte," I said, "as I was hastening along the Rue Gogard a woman burst from a gate and appealed to me for help. Without pausing to reflect, I followed her. The rest you know."

He sat for a moment looking at me.

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"In faith, Monsieur," he said at last, "if what you say is true,—and it hath a certain ring of truth about it,—you are not so greatly at fault as I had thought. I reprieve you from the gallows till I have tested your story. M. de Fronsac," he added, to a young man who stood near by, "I commit M. de Marsan to your care. See that he does not escape."

Fronsac bowed and took his place at my side.

"See that he is provided with new equipage," added M. le Comte, with a gleam of humor in his eye as he looked at me; "he hath need of it." And then he rose from his seat and his voice took a sterner ring. "Messieurs," he cried, "you have heard this message, and can guess how nearly it touches us. Whether it be true or false, we shall soon determine. Arm yourselves!"

D'Aurilly, leaning on his chair, interrupted him.

"Do you mean, M. le Comte," he asked disdainfully, "that you intend to go forth on this fool's errand?"

My master shot him a swift glance, in which I saw suspicion spring to life.

"It may be, as you say, a fool's errand, M. le Vicomte," he answered. "Should it prove so, this

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liar will lose his head. But should it appear that he spoke truth,"—he paused, his eyes still on d'Aurilly,—“should it appear that he spoke truth, it will not be his head that falls. In either case, a spy and traitor will get his dues.”

D'Aurilly's eyes were on the floor, but he kept countenance well.

“I am quite ready for the test, M. le Comte,” he said quietly. “Nothing will delight me more than to see a traitor get his dues.”

“Nor me,” assented M. le Comte, and looked at him a moment longer. Then he turned again to his men with fire in his eyes. “Arm yourselves, Messieurs!” he cried. “In twenty minutes we must be en route to Cadillac. Should this dog of a Roquefort, who dares fight only women, have been there before us, we will follow him even to his den in the Pyrenees and drag him forth like the cur he is! À outrance!”

They heard him with gleaming eyes and mantling cheeks. I could hear their swords rattling, eager to leap from the sheath. The lust of blood was on them, and they caught up the cry as their master ended.

“À outrance!”

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Up and down the corridors it echoed as they rushed for the door, cheering, shouting, cursing. They bore the news along the hall and out into the court, whence, in a moment, again came the cry,—

“À outrance!”

And the good people of Montauban, hearing it, hurried to their homes and barred their doors, for they knew that the hounds of Cadillac were loose again.

CHAPTER IV

I MEET A KINDRED SPIRIT

How it thrilled me—that cry echoing up and down the corridors! What would I not have given for the chance to ride forth, thigh to thigh with these lusty ruffians, to give and take good blows! Instead of that, here was I a prisoner—and at the thought my eyes turned to my companion.

He laughed as he caught my glance.

“Come, M. de Marsan,” he said, “your face is an open book. You are longing to fare out with these blood-letters. You heard M. le Comte instruct me to secure you a new equipage. Besides, I doubt not you stand in need of meat and drink, as well. So come,—for twenty minutes is not a long time.”

His last words, spoken after a moment’s teasing hesitation, brought the hot blood leaping to my cheek.

“Twenty minutes!” I stammered. “We go also, then, Monsieur?”

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"Assuredly," he laughed. "Come."

I followed him from the room blindly, unable to speak, trembling with excitement. What a chance! What fortune! I would show whether I or that cursed, hawk-faced d'Aurilly was to be believed! It made my blood boil to think of his cool insolence,—his black treachery,—for in my heart of hearts I was certain that it was he who had stolen my letter—but to prove it, there was the problem!

Down the stair we went to a great room piled with arms, where a mob of crazy men were already choosing what they needed. With great joy I found my own sword among a pile of others,—its leathern scabbard did not proclaim the Toledo within, thank Heaven!—and in five minutes was armed with pistols and poniard, clothed in a very handsome suit of black, with great boots, whose spurs clanked most merrily as I rattled down the stair behind my friend—for such, even in the few minutes I had known him, I was determined he should be.

"Now for food," he said, and I was not sorry to follow him to a room on the lower floor where there was a long table piled with meat and drink. "In faith, I have need of it myself," he added, as he

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dropped into the seat at my right, but his appetite was far from keeping pace with mine.

As I ate I looked at him, and my heart warmed to his frank face and honest eyes. Young he still was,—not more than a year or two my senior,—but there was that in his air which proclaimed the soldier and man of affairs, accustomed to the smiles of fortune and quite ready to coerce her should she attempt to turn her face away. I had already realized my helplessness without a friend in this great house, and I blessed the chance that had thrown me into this man's keeping.

"Do you know, M. de Marsan," he said suddenly, "I was quite moved by that little tale of yours. I was certain that M. le Comte could not doubt it."

"Thank you, Monsieur," I answered. "I mean to prove that it is true."

"And I am sure you will succeed," he said heartily. "But, my faith, how unfortunate it was that you should happen along the Rue Gogard just when you did! A moment earlier or later, and M. le Comte would perhaps be in position to bring the Duc de Roquefort to his knees. Small wonder he was vexed with you—more especially since he re-

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ceived that hideous scar across the face, which will stay with him always."

"I regret that I was such a marplot," I said, "but I could not well do other than I did. When a woman asks for aid——"

"And a young and pretty woman, was she not, Marsan?" queried my companion, smiling at me broadly.

"Yes," I admitted, "young and pretty. Do you know her, Monsieur?"

He smiled more broadly still.

"I think I can guess. Did you not hear her name?"

"The man who was with her called her Claire."

He nodded.

"That is she. Small wonder you leaped to follow her! Claire de Brissac, but six months out of the good sisters' keeping, yet already the toast of the whole valley of the Garonne. It has never been my good fortune to meet her, but such tales as we have heard! 'Tis said Roquefort himself is mad about her, and a month since Rumor had them wedded, but at the last the affair hung fire—through some caprice on her part, 'tis said. She would do well to wed him while she can," he added.

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"He may not choose to call a priest the second time."

"But her father," I said, "her uncle—will not they protect her?"

Fronsac laughed.

"Her uncle—pouf! He is nothing—a man of words—a man of some wit perhaps, but a man who cleans Roquefort's shoes. He has no spirit, not even enough to compel the girl's obedience, else had she been Madame la Duchesse long ere this. Her father was a man, though,—Sieur de Brissac,—perhaps you have heard of him? He stood upright at Roquefort's side, eye to eye, and his daughter hath his spirit. Great pity he is dead.

"It behooves Roquefort to marry," continued Fronsac after a moment. "He has no issue. His next of kin is a cousin—a Spaniard whom he hates. He hath been married once,—a virago from Valladolid, where his cousin also dwells. She made his life a burden, 'tis said, and with it all gave him no children. 'Twas more than man could bear. One morning she was found dead at the cliff-foot—an ugly story."

I understood now why Brissac's face had hard-

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ened when he had scented a romance in the air. He destined the girl for other things—for a higher place. I could not blame him, and yet—and yet. . . .

“ But what was Brissac’s business here?” I asked at length.

“ There are strange rumors afoot, Marsan,” and my companion lowered his voice and glanced about to see that no one else could hear. “ It is said that Roquefort, who, living there in the Pyrenees, is already more than half Spanish, is trying to persuade the towns of the Midi to revolt against the King and aid an army of invasion which Spain will provide. Brissac, ’tis said, came to Montauban to spread the intrigue here, where there is already a very pretty nest of heretics and malcontents. Fortunately, M. le Comte has a friend in Roquefort’s household—as you should know, since you brought a message from him—and learned of Brissac’s mission. This mission, you understand, this plan of Roquefort’s, is all in the air—there is no proof of it; but M. le Comte believed there were in Brissac’s keeping certain papers which would give all the proof needed. So he determined to corner Brissac, examine his papers, and if he found the

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ones he sought, lay them before the King. Besides, M. le Comte could kill two birds with one stone—he would do his King a signal service, and by the same stroke be rid forever of his enemy. But it was a matter which required finesse—so he determined himself to execute the clever little coup which you spoiled yestereve.”

“Yes, yes,” I said, understanding for the first time, and fell a moment silent, turning over this bit of news. “Monsieur,” I asked, “what is the cause of the feud between the houses of Cadillac and Roquefort?”

Fronsac shrugged his shoulders.

“I do not know,” he answered. “It hath been in the blood for a century. It started, I have heard, in some absurd question of precedence. It is the old story of the frog and the mouse who found it impossible to dwell in peace together. If Roquefort hath sacked Cadillac, there will be some merry work ere we return to Montauban.”

I smiled, for this was my first campaign, and it pleased me mightily. Besides, I had not only to win my spurs, but to prove also to M. le Comte that I was no liar.

“Monsieur,” I said, “permit me to assure you

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that you will have no cause to watch me. I am too anxious to see this expedition through. My honor it at stake, and I mean to prove that it is not I but another who is the traitor. But tell me something of the Vicomte d'Aurilly. How comes he in this household?"

I could feel my companion's eyes searching my face, but I did not meet his gaze, fearing that he might read my thought.

"The Vicomte d'Aurilly," he said quietly at last, "belongs to one of the oldest families of the Basses Pyrenees. Unhappily, the fortunes of his house have declined greatly, but this has not lessened his pride, as you may have perceived. He is in this household because he is a suitor for the hand of Mademoiselle Valérie, only daughter of M. le Comte."

For a moment I saw my theory falling into bits. If d'Aurilly were a suitor for Mademoiselle, why should he seek to betray her into Roquefort's hands?

"Only," added my companion, in a lower tone and with a certain look that drew from me a second glance, "I believe he is an unsuccessful suitor. It is said that M. le Comte had the goodness to

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consult his daughter in the matter and that she would have none of it."

Well, that was different—that gave me the key to d'Aurilly's motive! There was a tone in my companion's voice which drew my eyes again to his face—he was staring at the table before him, distraught, seeing nothing. It seemed to me that I could read his secret, and of a sudden I determined to tell him my theory. I glanced around and saw that the room was almost empty.

"M. de Fronsac," I began, "for what I am about to tell you I have no proof, yet I believe myself not far beside the mark. And first let me assure you on my honor that I am what I claim to be, Paul de Marsan, liege to M. le Comte, and that I brought a message to him. That message was stolen from me, as you have heard. I believe, Monsieur, that d'Aurilly was the thief."

My companion started round upon me, all his blood in his face.

"I believe, furthermore," I added, "that it was d'Aurilly who informed Roquefort of the defenceless condition of Cadillac. Perhaps he hath determined that if he cannot get Mademoiselle in one way, he will get her in another."

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Fronsac sat for a moment looking at me, his eyes dark, his brows knitted.

"Soul of God!" he breathed at last. "If you should be right! How M. le Comte's wrath would search him out and consume him! Yet, if he succeed, he will have Mademoiselle Valérie for hostage—he could dictate terms. What a plot—the more one thinks of it, the prettier it grows!" Then he turned to me suddenly. "M. de Marsan," he said impetuously, "we must be friends. We two, alone, must set about the unveiling of this scoundrel."

He held out his hand with frank earnestness, and I grasped it warmly.

"Nothing would please me more, Monsieur," I said with a great lightening of the heart. "I covet you for a friend."

"And I you."

I looked into his eyes and read truth and manhood there. So it was settled.

I could see that he was in a fever of impatience to be off, and just as I pushed my platter from me, the call to horse sounded from without. When M. le Comte said twenty minutes, he meant twenty minutes and not an instant more. And woe to all

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laggards! So we hurried down into the court, where there was a great tangle of men and beasts. Through this we pushed, my companion leading the way, to the place where our horses, which he had ordered from the stables, awaited us. My mount was a great, mettlesome sorrel, and I looked him over with exultation, for we had none such in our stable at Marsan.

A moment later M. le Comte himself strode down the steps into the court, his face still bandaged, and gave the signal to mount. We sprang to saddle on the instant, and it was wonderful to see how that mob resolved itself into a little army. Out through the gate we swung, three hundred strong, the standards—azure; on a bend or a laurel tree sinople—floating gayly in front.

The great gate clanged shut behind us, and I saw that even a small garrison could hold the place, so admirably was it fitted for defence. The sun was shining from a sky unclouded, and we made a brave show as we clattered through the narrow streets of the town, the crowd looking on from either side. Some of them cheered, but the most were silent and gazed at us with no friendly eyes, and I saw that, even in Montauban, M. le Comte's couch was not

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an easy one. At last we were out in the open country and struck into a gait which soon left the walls far behind.

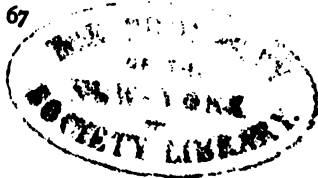
I glanced back for a last look at the town, and saw M. le Comte riding moodily along near the rear of the column. To his left rode Sieur Letourge, to his right d'Aurilly.

CHAPTER V

THE RIDE TO CADILLAC

M. LE COMTE's château of Cadillac stood upon the east bank of the Garonne, some ten leagues to the south of Montauban. My father had taken me thither once, when I was a mere boy,—what business called him there I do not know,—and I remember quite clearly the great house, with its high, graceful central tower, its broad wings, and the pretty park in front, sloping sweetly down to the river's edge. It besemed me at the time that the palace of the King of France must be less beautiful; but, alas, one's eyes grow more critical with age!

Our road for a time lay through the wide valley of the river, and as we swung onward I sat erect in the saddle and drank in great draughts of the cool air—so sweet, so pure, such as one finds only here in Gascony. It was good to be alive, in such gallant company, with promise of hard blows and, perchance, glory at the end. I stole a glance at Fronsac, not doubting that he shared my exultation, and was astonished to see him riding with



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rein loose and head bent and eye lack-lustre. He surprised my glance and smiled as he looked at me.

"The question, my friend," he said, "is, shall we be in time?"

I did not answer. I confess I did not wish the adventure to end so speedily and tamely. Besides, I had a great desire to see for myself the Duc de Roquefort's stronghold in the Pyrenees, for I had heard it was worth seeing.

"When was it you left Marsan?" he asked after a moment.

"At midnight on the twenty-fourth."

"And this is the twenty-seventh. On the morning of the twenty-fifth, doubtless, the Duc de Roquefort left his seat at Marleon and started for M. le Comte's château. By pushing his horses he might have reached Caumont that night. By evening of yesterday he should have been at Drovét, and he may get to the château by noon to-day. If he has carried out this programme, we shall be too late."

"But, Monsieur," I protested, "it may be that he did not set out from Marleon until the twenty-sixth, or some accident may have happened to delay him. Besides, he could not have gone by the

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direct route, since he was penetrating the country of M. le Comte's allies. He must keep his march secret, or run the risk of being taken prisoner. It is only by great diligence that he could reach the château to-day."

"True," assented my companion gloomily, "yet the Duc de Roquefort is always diligent—else he would not have dared undertake this expedition. He is a great gambler, ready to stake his head on the turn of a card. Some day he will lose, but it seems this time that he must win."

"Grant that he does reach the château at noon to-day," I said, "still, even with only thirty men, Madame la Comtesse should be able to hold out against him for some hours—and five or six hours are all that we shall need."

"True," and my companion nodded again, "Madame is not the woman to yield the château without a struggle. But what if she be surprised, if she be not expecting an assault, if the gates be open—what then, Monsieur?"

"Then," I cried boldly, "we will spur after them, even to their castle in the Pyrenees! M. le Comte himself hath said it!"

But Fronsac shook his head.

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"You have never visited Marleon, have you, M. de Marsan?" he asked.

"No, Monsieur, I have never been farther south than Lembeye."

"The castle of M. de Roquefort stands on a height above the town, and is approached only by a steep and narrow road, where two men can scarcely walk abreast. The Duc du Poitiers, with an army of three thousand men, once assaulted it in vain. It will not soon yield to force."

"If not to force, then to stratagem!" I cried.

"Quite right," chuckled a low voice behind us. "If not to force, then to stratagem! Well said!"

I turned with a start to see that it was the Sieur Letourge, who had ridden close to us without our perceiving it, and who had overheard my last words.

"M. de Fronsac," he continued, bowing, and urging his horse nose to nose with mine, "M. le Comte wishes to speak with you. Do you fall back and join him. I will endeavor to entertain our friend here," and he nodded to me.

Fronsac obeyed without a word, and for some moments my new companion and I rode side by side in silence. I glanced at him narrowly from

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time to time, for this was the first that I had seen him in the light of day and close at hand. A tall, raw-boned man, whose hair was turning gray, and whose stern face, with its arched nose, deep-set eyes, firm mouth, and aggressive chin, told of the will which would never accept defeat. Not a pleasant face, perhaps, yet a strong one, an honest one, and one which drew my eyes to it by a kind of fascination. This was the man, as I well knew, who for some score of years had been the right hand of M. le Comte and who had done more than any other to confirm his rule over his great estates, to win for him friends and allies the length and breadth of the Midi, and to impress his enemies, the Duc de Roquefort among the number, with a hearty respect for his heavy fist—his heavy fist, that is, the two or three hundred reckless rogues whom he held in leash and let loose from time to time to punish some contumacious lordling or frighten into subjection a rebellious peasantry. Ah, how the peasants hated him,—this man, Letourge, who had pulled himself up from among them by sheer strength of will and straightway forgot his kinship with them! He could not serve two masters, so he served M. le Comte, and served him well.

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He caught my glance, and smiled grimly as he looked into my eyes.

"You were talking of storming Roquefort's castle at Marleon?" he asked. ,

"Yes, Monsieur."

"'Twill be no easy task."

"But it may not be needful. We may reach the château in time."

He shook his head, as Fronsac had done.

"Had we set out last night," he said. "Had we permitted you to deliver your message straightway! I can see now that I played the fool. Yet the sight of you there in M. le Comte's antechamber took my wits away. You spoke a true word, M. de Marsan, when you told me I should regret my wrath."

I looked at him eagerly.

"Then you too believe my story, M. Letourge?" I asked quickly.

He gave me one look from under his eyebrows.

"Surely," he answered. "Babes scarce out of leading-strings do not lie so glibly. They seem ready, though, to run to the aid of the first woman they hear squawking!"

I flushed at his tone, but checked the retort which

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sprang to my lips. After all, I had doubtless much to learn.

"But though we may not reach Cadillac in time, we may yet win the race," he added. "You have noted, perhaps, that we are saving the horses. Should we push forward at full speed to Cadillac, that would be the end—we could go no farther. As it is, we are starting on a long journey, and Roquefort may be hard put to it ere he gets back again behind his battlements at Marleon."

He fell silent again, looking so stern and inflexible that I had not the heart to address him. Yet it seemed to me that M. le Comte was in error. Even if the whole force were not sent forward, it would be wise, I thought, to send a small party at full speed to attempt to warn Madame. But this was my first campaign, so why should I venture to advise?

At last I heard the gallop of a horse's feet behind us, and Fronsac rode up, his eyes agleam with excitement.

"Such fortune!" he cried, as he pulled up his horse beside mine. "Do you know to what M. le Comte has consented, my friend? It is that you and I shall ride on together, full speed, to Cadillac."

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It was my thought; I was not a fool, after all!

"You forget," interrupted Letourge dryly, "that M. de Marsan is a prisoner."

"And in my charge," said Fronsac proudly. "M. le Comte entrusts him to me. I will answer for him."

"Thank you, Monsieur," I said, my face aglow with pleasure. "I shall not forget your kindness. When do we set out?"

"At once!" cried Fronsac, and clapped spur to flank.

With a last glance at Letourge, who was looking at us with amused eyes, I sped after him, and in a moment we were past the troop and with only the open road before us. Neck and neck we went for half an hour or more, my heart bounding at the rapid motion, and then we drew rein to give our mounts a breathing-spell.

"What a chance!" cried my companion, lifting his hat and wiping the sweat from his brow. "Do you know, Marsan, there is an adventure before us? I believe we shall reach the château ahead of Roquefort and his rascals!"

"I trust so," I said. "It would be a privilege to be in time to warn Madame."

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"And Mademoiselle," he added.

"Of course, and Mademoiselle," I assented, smiling to myself.

"Then come!" he cried, "spur on again!"

And spur on again we did, under the trees of the river road, down to the ford and across, then straight over-country as the river bent away eastward, the peasants' huts flying past us and the workers in the fields straightening themselves with cracking joints to get a glimpse of us. An hour of this riding, and we were back at the river's bank, where we stopped to wind and water our horses. Then across the river again, with Brassu on our left, and only two leagues to go. But noon was long since past, and I saw Fronsac, with anxious eyes, mark the declining sun. Still on and on we went, and I could feel my mount trembling between my knees. Plainly there was no question here of sparing horses.

"Around that bend, up the hill beyond, and we are there!" cried my companion at last. "Look to your pistols!"

I drew them from their holsters, one after the other, and assured myself that they were primed and ready for service.

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In a moment we were around the bend of the road, and before us lay a long, gentle slope. Up this we spurred, and there beneath us in the valley stood the château, peaceful and smiling under the bright sun of the Midi. I could see half a dozen lacqueys lolling about the great gate. But it was not at them I looked. It was at a gleam of arms and warlike equipage which was just topping the opposite slope, and my heart leaped, for I knew that it must be the force of Roquefort.

There was a thrill in that moment worth a year of life. How my blood sang!

But no pausing there! Again the spur, and down the slope we rushed, our mounts responding gamely with a last burst of speed. Roquefort's men must have seen us in the same instant and understood our mission, for they came tearing down the other slope to head us off. The cries, the beat of horses' hoofs, the rattle of arms, reached to the château. At a glance, I saw the lacqueys laboring at the great gates—we should be in time—the château was safe—we would win the race!

Then, of a sudden, came a shrill, frenzied cry from my companion, and he jerked his horse about and galloped full course towards the river. For an

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instant I thought him seized with sudden madness, but as my eyes followed him I saw a sight which made my heart stand still.

Almost on the river bank an arbor had been built, and at its door a girl was standing. I saw at a glance her beauty and the richness of her dress. It must be Mademoiselle—it could be no other! In a flash, I too had pulled my horse around and galloped after my companion. Thank God, there was not far to go!

“This way, this way, Valérie!” cried Fronsac, standing up in his stirrups, frenzied with excitement.

She stood for an instant confused, uncertain, looking at him. Then she sped towards him, her face alight.

I thought for a breath that he must ride her down, but he jerked his horse back upon its haunches, leaned down, and swung her to the saddle before him. She threw her arms about him and laid her head upon his breast. I felt my eyes grow wet with sudden tears as I saw the tenderness of that gesture.

It seemed given in the face of death, for down the hillside at us thundered Roquefort's rascals.

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There was no escape—yet a man must not die un-avenged, and I snatched my pistols out and fired at the leaders. I saw one of them grimace in agony; down he came, headlong; a horse stumbled and fell, throwing another off its feet. I tried to pull my mount aside, but in an instant the flood of cursing men and tangled, kicking beasts had overwhelmed me and borne me down, then caught me up again and hurled me down the hill. I caught a glimpse of my companion standing at bay, his back to the river, his fair burden still in his arms, still gazing up into his face—what an instant for a man to die! Then the flood was over me again and crushed the light away.

CHAPTER VI

I TASTE OF ROQUEFORT'S TEMPER

"AGAIN!" cried a rude voice, and some unseen power caught me up and thrust me under water. It was icy cold, and I felt dimly, without caring greatly, that I was suffocating. Then I was plucked forth again—ah, how sweet the good air was! I drew a long breath and opened my eyes.

The river was flowing at my feet. A sturdy knave supported me on either side and looked questioningly at a man who stood two paces off. It was they who had plunged me under water. Hot with rage, I tried to shake them off, but they held me as though I were a child.

"That is better!" cried the man. "He seems to have come to his senses. Stand him against that tree."

They led me to the tree he pointed out and stood me up against it. I wiped the water from my eyes and looked about me again. This time I understood. I was a prisoner, and the man directing the affair was no doubt the Duc de Roquefort. He

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came close to me where I stood, still trembling with exhaustion.

“I suppose you see the desperate nature of your case,” he said coolly, his deep-set eyes glittering full into mine. He had a swarthy face, not uncommonly, though lined with passion, and his eyes were like a basilisk’s. “You will see it still more clearly when I assure you that there is only one possible way for you to save your life—that is by answering truthfully my questions.”

He paused a moment as though to permit his words to sink deep into my consciousness. There was need that I should think quickly. I glanced towards the château and saw that the gates were closed and the tower manned. I looked at Roquefort’s troops, dismounted, lolling in the edge of the wood along the river, waiting his pleasure. One group, however, was still under arms, and my pulse leaped as I saw they were on guard with Fronsac and Mademoiselle in their midst. If by some lie I could hold Roquefort here for two hours or even less, M. le Comte might yet be in time for rescue. I felt my captor’s eyes on mine and turned away for fear he would read my thought.

“You understand?” he asked, after a moment.

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I nodded.

"And you agree?"

"Proceed, Monsieur," I said.

"You were with Cadillac?" he asked.

"At Montauban—yes, Monsieur."

"Come, no lies. He is near by."

"No nearer than Montauban, Monsieur."

He glared at me for a moment, but my strength had come back to me, and this time I could meet his gaze without shrinking.

"Then what do you and Fronsac here?" he demanded.

"My friend carries a message to Madame," I answered readily, glad to find an answer that was near the truth. "He chose me to ride hither with him."

He looked at me yet a moment, then turned away and gazed towards the château, twisting his moustaches and muttering to himself.

"If I had proof—if I had proof—there would yet be time to capture the woman too and send this pretty place up in smoke!"

He turned again to me with those snake's eyes of his agleam.

"Is this true?" he demanded between his teeth.

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"Tell me again, is this true? Think well before you answer. A lie will cost you such hours of agony as you have never dreamed of."

"There is M. de Fronsac," I suggested. "Ask him also."

He laughed harshly.

"M. de Fronsac prefers to hold his tongue," he said. "Think you I should otherwise have troubled to bring you back to life? Answer me. Is this true?"

"It is true," I repeated.

"Very good. I am going to believe you. But if I find you have betrayed me——" A look finished the sentence, which, indeed, needed no other ending.

I did not flinch under his gaze. Could I but keep him there until M. le Comte laid hold of him, I need care little for his threats.

He hurried away from me and was soon preparing for the attack in a manner which bespoke his skill in warfare. Four men were sent across the valley to the heights beyond to watch the road by which Fronsac and I had come, and so guard against surprise. A hundred men were massed opposite the great gate of the château, and two par-

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ties of perhaps fifty passed out of sight behind either wing. A moment later an order came to the men who were guarding me, and I was led towards the group that stood about the other prisoners.

I saw Fronsac looking towards me with joyful face, and then he stooped and whispered a few words into the ear of Mademoiselle. What they were I could only guess, but she arose from the log on which she had been sitting and turned her bright face towards me. Then, for the first time, I caught the full power of her beauty, and as I looked I did not wonder that d'Aurilly should turn traitor or Fronsac risk his life for her, since in their hearts there was no other face like that which lived in mine.

"So you still live, Marsan!" cried my friend, as the group parted to let me through. "But I am glad!" and he came towards me, holding out his hands.

My heart warmed to him anew as I hastened forward to grasp them, but one of the guards stepped in between.

"No talking!" he said gruffly. "It is M. le Duc's order."

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I felt my cheek crimson at his insolence, and for an instant my hands itched to be at his throat, but I caught Fronsac's eyes fixed on me warningly, and realized that no good could come of violence. So we sat down with Roquefort's man between us and watched the attack on the château with feelings I need not describe.

Events had gone forward there even in the few minutes my attention had been drawn away. The force at the main gate had armed themselves with a great log, and, even as we turned towards them, a pistol-shot gave the signal which put it in motion. At the same instant a great uproar arose behind the château, proving that the attack had begun there also. The men with the log moved slowly at first, but faster and faster as they gathered momentum. As they neared the gate a dozen muskets were fired from the walls, and some few of Roquefort's men fell, but the forward rush did not pause nor waver. Plainly the garrison of the château was too small to make effective resistance, and my heart fell within me. What if I had done wrong in keeping Roquefort here? What if M. le Comte should, after all, arrive too late? You can guess the agony of the thought!

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On and on swept the rush, and the log was hurled against the gate with a tremendous crash. In a moment it was caught up again like a wisp of straw, borne backward, and hurled forward. I saw a group of the assailants linger at the gate, then suddenly scurry away from it. There came a flash of flame, a roar, and a great cloud of smoke whirled skyward.

“A petard!” cried Fronsac. “They have fired a petard!”

As the smoke passed, we saw that one of the gates had been blown inward, but the other still hung by its bars. With a cheer, the assailants rushed forward. It was over then! I had lost M. le Comte his wife and his château! Now, indeed, would he have cause to hate me!

But of a sudden the four sentries burst out of the wood at the hill-crest like men possessed and scoured down into the valley. I saw Roquefort exchange a hurried word with them, give a quick order, then spur towards us, and as he neared us I marked how rage distorted his face and made it hideous.

“Bring up a dozen horses—the freshest!” he cried to the guard, and as the men hastened away

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he turned to me. "Monsieur," he said in a voice that chilled me, "I warned you of your fate should you betray me, but it seems you did not heed the warning. You counted, perhaps, on a rescue. But you will never see Cadillac again,—oh, how I shall pay you for this!"

His eyes were glaring into mine, bloodshot, venomous, and I confess that at the bottom of my soul I feared him. Yet still I managed to achieve a smile.

"We shall see, M. le Duc," I said.

He seemed choked with rage and answered only by an angry gesture of the arm which hastened up the horses. In a moment Fronsac and I were bound to two of them and Mademoiselle strapped to a pillion behind a brawny soldier. I was hot with rage at the roughness with which they treated her, and I saw Fronsac straining at his bonds, his face livid. But in a breath we were off, the three of us with our little escort, at first under the trees along the river, then up the slope beyond. As we reached the crest, I looked back and saw Roquefort marshalling his forces at the edge of the wood to cover our retreat, and beyond, along the road, I fancied I caught a glimpse of M. le Comte's troops,

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but we were deep among the trees again before I could make sure.

Down the hill we went at a pace which, tied to the saddle as I was, seemed doubly foolhardy. Plainly our escort had their orders, and feared death less than the displeasure of their master. Evening was at hand, and under the great trees it was soon so dark that the man before me, leading my horse, seemed but a shadow. Yet they appeared well acquainted with the ground, and there was not a moment's slackening of our speed.

At last we emerged from the forest into a rough road, and for a moment the brightness seemed almost that of noonday, so great was the contrast with the gloom of the woods. A wide and fertile plain lay before us, and away to the south I could see a range of mountains faintly outlined against the sky, and I knew they were the Pyrenees.

The road led us southward along a river, which I guessed was the Ariege. But though the land seemed fertile and promising, there were few houses—only a narrow peasant's hut here and there, more squalid than any I had ever seen in our good Marsan country. So when, presently, there appeared ahead, standing just at the edge of the

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road, a building of more than usual size, I looked at it with no little interest. As we neared it, I saw standing before the door two horses with women's equipage, and of a sudden the leader of our troop put his fingers to his mouth and blew a shrill blast.

Almost on the instant the door opened and two women came out, attended by a little, fat man, evidently the keeper of the house. They stood looking at us for a moment, then turned to mount their horses. There seemed something strangely familiar about one of the figures. As she stood, I could not see her face, for she wore a hood pulled over her head and a cloak wrapped about her to protect her from the cold—then, with a start, I recognized the cloak. It was mine—the one I had dropped in the hallway of the house in the Rue Gogard. And with fast-beating heart I knew that it was Claire who wore it!

Some exclamation must have escaped me, for the fellow at my right asked me roughly what the matter was. I did not answer, and we rode on in silence. In a moment we had pulled up before the house, and our leader rode ahead to exchange a word with the women. Then he came back again

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and ordered forward the horse on which Mademoiselle was mounted. She was unstrapped and assisted to alight, then led into the inn, doubtless for refreshment.

But I was not thinking of her, I was watching Claire—the poise of her figure, her superb grace in the saddle. Slowly she reined her horse around until she faced us, and I saw her examining the members of the troop. With feverish lips, I watched her eyes as they went from face to face—and in a moment I was looking straight into them, with the blood bounding to my temples.

For a breath she held me so, then turned her eyes away, slowly, indifferently, without a sign that she had known me!

And of a sudden I found myself shivering with cold, and remembered, for the first time that afternoon, that my clothing was still dripping with the water of the river.

CHAPTER VII

A VISION IN THE NIGHT

DIMLY I saw Mademoiselle come out again into the road and mount a horse that had been provided for her. Fronsac and I were unbound, though not entrusted with our horses' bridles, and we set forward at a more leisurely pace than had marked the first stage of the journey. Plainly there was no longer immediate fear of pursuit, and our guard relaxed somewhat, breaking now and again into a snatch of song or shouting a rude joke back and forth. I saw that our retreat was being made on some well-matured plan, and my heart sank as I realized how remote was chance of rescue.

The man at my right, who seemed to regard me with some small trace of kindness, perceiving my blue nose and chattering teeth, gave me his cloak, and this wrapped around me rendered the journey somewhat less of torture. But nothing could drive away the chill which had settled about my heart when I had looked into Claire's eyes and caught no

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answering gleam of friendship and interest in them. I did not see her again, for she kept to the rear of the column with the other women, and I held my face turned resolutely to the front, for even a cadet of Gascony has his pride.

Night found us near Dravet, as I gathered from the talk of my guards, for the country was quite unknown to me, but we left that squalid village far on the right and pressed on through the darkness for an hour longer. It seemed to me, from the uneven nature of the ground, that we must have left the road, and I was about to ask whither we were bound, when the command came to halt.

I could distinguish absolutely nothing in the darkness, but my guards appeared to know the place well, and one of them, dismounting, led my horse slowly forward across what seemed to be a bridge. I caught a gleam of light ahead, and in a moment we turned a corner and I could see something of my surroundings.

We were in the inner bailey of a castle, once of no little strength, but fallen quite into decay, for the curtains were cracked and ragged and broken, and two of the corner towers had toppled over. The donjon loomed up into the darkness at one

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end, and alone seemed to have defied the hand of time and the despoiler.

Towards this we rode, and at the door my captors leaped from the saddle and helped me to dismount. I should have fallen had they not supported me, for my joints had lost the power of motion. They led me to a corner where a fire had just been started, and set me with my back against the wall.

In a moment I saw them leading Fronsac in, and they set him down opposite me, one of the men taking the precaution to stand guard between. Presently the women passed, and I saw Mademoiselle smile at my companion—a smile which brought the glad blood to his cheek and in which there was life and hope. The others did not even glance in our direction, though I watched them till they had disappeared into an inner room.

But a woman's coldness could not rob me of the grateful warmth of the fire. How good it felt! My clothing was soon steaming in the heat, and I struggled to my feet and turned slowly about before the blaze in order to dry myself more thoroughly. I felt better with every minute, save for a great and growing emptiness within, for I had eaten nothing

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since my hasty breakfast with Fronsac at Montauban.

It was perhaps half an hour before one of the men came back to us and ordered us to follow him. He led the way to the right through a doorway into a lofty room, which, shattered and time-stained as it was, retained still some traces of its former beauty. At one end was the great fireplace, and in this a fire had been kindled and two men were busily engaged preparing food. A lamb had been bought or stolen somewhere, stripped deftly of its hide, dismembered, and set to roast before the fire, and most savory and inviting did it smell. A pile of bread, nearer black than white, was heaped upon a table, and to this we were led and told to take what we wanted. A dripping piece of meat was added, and we sat down again in our warm corners to enjoy it. Even now it makes my mouth run to think of that meal and how good it tasted.

I could see that Fronsac relished it too, though the blood in his cheek may have come from happiness. The guard still watched between us to prevent our talking, while the others sat before the fire, crunching their bread and meat. A sorry-looking lot they were, gathered, doubtless, from

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the banditti who infested the mountains—Spaniards most of them, swarthy and dirty, with countenances where one might search in vain for a trace of kindness. Yet sitting there I caught a glimpse of the joy they got from life—a hard day's march or stirring fight, and then, after it, a snug seat close before a good fire, with bread and meat, and, oh! such hunger to relish it!

The women I saw nothing of, and I thanked fortune that they had a place apart in which to pass the night. But it was evidently here that we were to sleep, for some of the men had already rolled themselves in their cloaks and lay down against the wall, a saddle for pillow, prepared to spend the night with what comfort they could. Not one of them, except the guard between us, seemed to give us the slightest heed, and for the first time since I had awakened with the water of the river in my ears the thought of escape came to me. With only one man to deal with, it would not be a difficult thing, provided he could be silenced without awaking any of the others. At least, it was worth thinking over. I got slowly to my feet, stretched my arms, and yawned. Then I took a step towards the door, but the sentry stopped me.

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"You will remain here, Monsieur," he said.

"But I am weary," I protested. "Where am I to spend the night?"

He grinned and pointed back at the corner.

"You will spend it there," he said. "But here comes Drouet, whose business it is to look after you."

As he spoke the fellow who had ridden at my right all evening entered, and with him another whom I remembered having seen with Fronsac. They came direct to us, spread their cloaks before the fire, and Drouet motioned me to seat myself on his.

"As I am responsible for your continuance with us, Monsieur," he said, sitting down beside me, "we must take a few precautions."

"Very well," I said. "Do whatever you think needful."

Without more words he produced some pieces of rope. With one of these he bound my right ankle to his left one, and then the guard came forward and bound our wrists together.

"I think that will do," he said. "I advise you not to endeavor to get them loose, Monsieur, for I sleep lightly. Besides, M. le Duc cautioned me

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not to hesitate to kill you should you attempt escape."

"I shall attempt to do nothing but go to sleep," I answered, yawning, and we lay down together.

I saw that Fronsac watched all this keenly, and I knew that he too was thinking of flight. His guard sat down beside him, as mine had done.

"There are two courses open to you, Monsieur," he said. "Either give me your word of honor not to attempt to get away, or submit to the programme that has been carried out with your friend yonder. I must tie your hands and feet."

"But," Fronsac protested, "they have not tied the hands and feet of my friend."

The fellow stepped over and looked down to see how I was secured.

"No," he said, "but I am not a light sleeper, like Drouet there. I can't afford to take that chance. Come, Monsieur, choose."

For answer Fronsac held out his hands, and in a moment they were lashed together. Another rope was bound tightly about his ankles.

"There," grunted the fellow, as he secured the last knot. "Now, Monsieur, you may try to leave

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us if you wish. Only I warn you there are some sentries about who will not hesitate to fire," and rolling himself in his cloak, he was snoring in a moment.

Despite my fatigue, sleep did not come readily to my eyes. My brain was busy with thoughts of escape. I realized that once within Roquefort's stronghold at Marleon I should not find it easy to come out again, and I had no desire for that introduction to the rack which he had promised me. But to escape was no easy thing. I lay for long trying to devise some plan which offered at least a prospect of success. I might reach out with my free hand, grasp Drouet by the throat, and hold him so until he ceased to breathe. But I realized that, with one hand, it was most unlikely I could master so powerful a man, to say nothing of the noise such an encounter must create. A sudden blow was impossible for like reason. I tried softly to remove my hand from the knot which held it, but found that, too, impossible. I tried to reach the knot with my free hand, but Drouet stirred uneasily, and I lay still again. By the fading light of the fire I could dimly see Fronsac struggling to free himself, but with no more success than I. A

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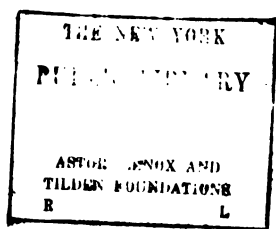
sentry's step sounded at the door and a shadowy figure appeared there for a moment, looking over the room to see that all was well. Then he disappeared into the outer darkness, and for a time I watched the shadows dancing along the walls and over the ceiling. Gradually they grew faint and fainter, and fatigue weighed down my eyelids.

How long I slept I do not know, but I opened my eyes with a start and looked about the room. The fire had burned so low on the hearth that the place was almost in utter darkness, save for an instant, now and then, as a log fell asunder and sent a shower of sparks into the air. It was during one of these flashes that I fancied I saw a figure moving far down the room, but the light died away before I could make sure. I rubbed my eyes, braced my head against the wall, and waited. Yes, there it was again—this time there could be no mistaking—a cloaked figure bending over one man and then passing on to the next. What could it mean?

The light died out again, but in a moment I saw the figure once more, this time much nearer, and coming slowly down the line of sleeping men to-



My bonds fell from me



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wards the corner where I lay. Nearer and nearer it came, until I felt a pair of eyes looking down into mine.

"M. de Marsan," breathed a voice, "you are awake? Close your eyes to show me that you hear."

I closed my eyes an instant, the blood rushing to my temples, my nerves a-quiver. I could not mistake that voice—no, not even its whisper!

"Can you get up?" asked the voice.

I shook my head and pointed with my free hand to my bound wrist and ankle.

In an instant the figure had dropped to its knees beside me. I felt swift fingers lightly examining the ropes, I caught the gleam of a knife, and my bonds fell from me.

"Now, follow me, Monsieur," whispered the voice.

For the moment I forgot everything but the joy of being with her—the joy of holding her hand again and whispering in her ear. I got cautiously to my knees, to my feet, and stole down the room after her. A shower of ashes threw the place into sudden light and sent my heart into my throat, but none of the sleepers stirred. She paused in the

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shadow of the farthest corner until I had reached her side.

"There, M. de Marsan," she whispered, "is a door through which, I think, you may escape. You see I am not ungrateful."

"Ungrateful!" I repeated, hoarsely, and caught her hand.

"You must go, Monsieur," she protested. "Even a moment's loitering here may mean recapture."

"But I am going to risk that moment, Mademoiselle," I said. "You see that my words have proved true and that we have met again; only, this afternoon, I thought you had forgot me."

"Oh, no, M. de Marsan," she breathed, "I had not forgot you, nor am I like to do so. Only I knew I could not help you did any one suspect me for your friend. But you must go—hasten!"

"And you?" I asked.

"Oh, I—I will return to the apartment where my maid and Mademoiselle de Cadillac are sleeping," and she made a little motion towards another door, almost hidden in the shadow.

There was a step at the door, and we saw the sentry enter and pause to glance about the room.

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For an instant I was certain he had seen us, so intently did he look towards the corner where we were, but at last he passed on again.

I felt that the hand I held close in mine was trembling.

"You see the folly of delay, Monsieur," she panted. "You must go,—they must not retake you,—better to die fighting than to wait for death at Marleon! Ah, you do not know!" and she drew her hand from mine and pressed it for a moment to her eyes. How fair, how sweet she was! How I trembled to take her in my arms! "Adieu, Monsieur. My prayers go with you."

"And only your prayers, Mademoiselle?" I whispered, my heart on fire.

"Go, go!" she repeated, and held out her hand.

I caught it in both of mine and pressed it to my lips.

"Again I say, Mademoiselle, that this is not the last time," and I held tightly to the hand, which she would have drawn away. "I understand nothing of how you came to be awaiting us at the inn back yonder, but I know that it is fate which has thrown us together twice already. The third time we shall not part so quickly."

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And again she shook her head as she had in the Rue Gogard.

"I have not your confidence in fate, Monsieur," she said. "Believe me, you must go. If you will not consider your own peril, think of mine."

True, I was a fool to have forgot it.

"Pardon," I said. "Forgive me for thinking only of myself."

I pressed my lips again to her soft, warm palm, and, not trusting myself to look at her, turned towards the door she had pointed out to me.

And then, in an instant, I remembered! I had not myself alone to consider—there were Mademoiselle and Fronsac who must be freed also! I could not leave them in this den of wolves—what a coward they would think me!

I turned back. None of the sleepers had stirred, nor seemed like to stir. Claire had disappeared into the inner room. I groped my way slowly across the floor. I could see Fronsac sitting against the wall. How his eyes brightened at sight of me coming back! He held his bound wrists towards me eagerly.

"I thought you gone," he whispered. "I was

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a fool! I might have known you would come back!"

His eyes were dark and moist with emotion—his voice trembled. What a thing it is to have a friend!

And then, of a sudden, there came the beat of horses' hoofs without, a sharp challenge; Drouet, awakened, rubbed his eyes sleepily, saw the severed cords, and leaped to his feet with a yell. I tried to rise to meet him, but he saw me on the instant, and with a bound like a panther's was upon me.

CHAPTER VIII

MARLEON!

ONE man I might play even with, but not with the half dozen who sprang to Drouet's aid, and at the end of a moment, seeing resistance useless, I lay still, cursing my ill-fortune. The struggle had awakened all the men, and they crowded about us, asking many questions.

"What is this?" cried a deep voice from the door. "Fighting among yourselves? God! But some head shall suffer!"

I recognized the voice and got slowly to my feet, as Roquefort strode into the light cast by the fire. I looked at him in amazement, for his eyes were blood-shot, his face haggard, his clothing stained with mud. Plainly, M. le Comte had given him a warm argument, and he had been hard put to it to shake him off.

"It was no quarrel, M. le Duc," explained Drouet, "nothing but this fellow trying to escape."

"To escape!" cried Roquefort. "Do you tell

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me that you left a door for his escape, Drouet? You value that neck of yours but lightly, then!"

"I bound him to me hand and foot, Monsieur," said Drouet humbly. "You know I am not a heavy sleeper. How he got loose without awakening me I cannot imagine."

He went to the spot where we had lain and picked up the pieces of rope. A sharp cry escaped him as he looked at them.

"Well?" asked Roquefort angrily. "What new surprise?"

"See, Monsieur," cried Drouet, holding out the rope-ends. "He did not get loose of himself. Some one came, cut the ropes, and freed him."

For a moment Roquefort gazed at the ropes without speaking, but his face, when he raised it to mine, was terrible.

"A traitor!" he said. "A traitor here!" and he looked about him with eyes that sent a shiver through his men. "Oh, but some one shall pay for this! You shall tell us, Monsieur, who it was that cut your bonds and then you will have a companion on the rack. What a death! I could find it in my heart to pity you, Monsieur, did I not hate you so!"

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He stood yet a moment looking at me, then turned away, and I heard a murmur from the crowd at the door.

"To horse!" he cried. "Bind these two rogues to the saddle! Bring forth the women!"

In an instant all was confusion. Drouet and another led me away, out into the black court, through a crowd of sweating horses and cursing men-at-arms, to the place where our mounts were stabled. Again I was seated in the saddle, and a rope passed from ankle to ankle beneath the horse's belly. Drouet laughed savagely as he tied the last knot.

"There, my brave," he said, "I'll warrant you'll stay with us yet a little longer."

I had not the heart to retort, but sat silent while the troop fell into line again. I strained my eyes through the darkness for a glimpse of Fronsac or the women, but saw no sign of either. At last came the word to march, and we set off slowly through the night. No road, this time, but what seemed rough hill-land, so slowly did we pick our way. Drouet was in a savage mood, reflecting, doubtless, that had I escaped he must have suffered for it, and did what he could to make my position irk-

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some by leading my mount over the roughest places and pricking him suddenly from time to time.

Dawn found us in a narrow valley with a little brook singing through. Far ahead I could see the peaks of the Pyrenees, nearer than the day before, but still leagues away. In the midst of a little grove of trees the word came to dismount, and the men swung themselves wearily from the saddle. It was easy to see that they had been hard pressed. Their horses were almost done; yes, and the stains upon their clothing were not wholly those of the road, for some carried their arms in slings, some had their heads bandaged, some clung to the saddle with convulsive fingers, their lips purple, their eyes set with suffering. So there had been a battle, and M. le Comte had won! I remembered his concern to keep his horses fresh and looked back over the way we had come in the wild hope that I might see him in pursuit, but I saw only the bleak hillside, the barren rocks, the strip of woodland.

Yet Roquefort shared the same concern, for he stationed sentries on the neighboring hilltops and gave his men but a brief half-hour to prepare their meal and wind their horses. And here I caught a glimpse of the agony of a soldier's life—the

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wounded men groaning and cursing, the white fear of death upon them, their lips trembling in self-pity, receiving but scant attention, for the others were dead-weary from their long ride. One poor fellow came suddenly to the end, and was carried aside with little ceremony and a few rocks piled upon him. These scoundrels looked too often in the face of death to fear it until it came home to each one separately.

The half hour passed and we set forward again, only this time, in the light, I saw that Roquefort rode at the column's head with another man at his side. My eyes dwelt upon him idly and I wondered who this newcomer could be. He sat his horse well and was richly dressed—so richly that he seemed out of place in this bedraggled, road-stained mob. They were deep in talk, and at one moment Roquefort pointed away to the west. His companion turned his head to follow the gesture, and I caught his profile—there was no mistaking that arched nose, that low forehead, that cruel mouth—it was d'Aurilly!

I clutched my saddle to hold my seat, my emotion shook me so. Then he was the traitor, after all! And the plot, of which I had caught but a

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glimpse, lay before me like an open book. D'Aurilly was to have Mademoiselle; Fronsac could eat his heart out if he chose, or swallow his chagrin, if his gullet were big enough; with Mademoiselle for hostage, M. le Comte could be brought to terms; and as for me——

I would not think of it! Here was I still alive and with my wits to help me. Even at the worst there should be no tearing to pieces, no death by inches. I would find an easier way than that. Yet I do not deny that for an instant I found it in my heart to regret the green fields of Marsan, to regret that I had not been content to remain there quietly and leave these great men to find other pawns to sacrifice. Yet, after all, this was life, this was living, and only the night before I had looked into a pair of eyes and fancied I saw love there. Was not that worth something?

What need to tell more of the journey? Day and night we pushed on, until our horses stumbled under us, over hill, through valley, avoiding the roads, seeking hidden ways, where M. le Comte would not think to follow. And always my guard was about me, until at last I came to see that Roquefort was taking no chance of losing me——

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no chance of missing his vengeance. The women were kept to the rear of the column; Fronsac I seldom saw; d'Aurilly passed me by with a sneering smile that turned me hot for murder. Well that I was young and strong, with a boy's hopeful heart, else had despair weighed me down!

'Tis true, Drouet relaxed a little as we journeyed forward and exchanged a word with me now and then, pointing out the features of the country through which we rode or telling some little story of his numberless campaigns with Roquefort. Gruesome stories they were, most of them, of murder, outrage, robbery, for Roquefort's men were not troubled by nice consciences and took, without questioning, all that came to their nets. Nor did their leader concern himself about them, so they went willingly on his business and fought his battles for him.

At noon of the third day we came to Marleon.

"You were asking about the castle," said Drouet suddenly. "Behold it."

I looked with all my eyes, but saw only the tumbled roofs of the little town.

"You look too low," he said. "Higher, on the cliff behind the town."

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Then I descried it, and my heart grew cold as I looked at it. Two hundred feet or more the cliff sprang upward, straight as a house's wall and near as smooth—so smooth that no tree nor shrub caught foothold on it. And just at the summit stood the castle, frowning down upon the village like some tireless, merciless watch-dog.

"But to get to it," I ventured, after a moment. "It seems to have been built only for the birds."

"You will see," and Drouet laughed meaningly. "I advise you to look well at the way, Monsieur; you may never have occasion to use it a second time."

I rode on without replying. What good to bandy words with this scoundrel? But as we drew nearer to the place my heart fell more and more. It might defy the king's army.

The road turned abruptly to the right of the town, and then in again behind a little spur of the mountain. Here the ascent began, and the way at once became so narrow that two horses could not go abreast. On either hand towered the crags, whence a dozen ambushed men might easily pick off a thousand. In and out the path wound and

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ever upward, until, at last, it stopped before a great gate, barred heavily with iron. I saw how adroitly the path was fashioned, so that not more than two men at a time could approach the gate. A horn sounded, our force was evidently scrutinized with care from within, and then the gate creaked back upon its hinges. In a moment we were in the court, and the word was given to dismount.

"Follow me, Monsieur," said Drouet, without giving me a moment to look about me or to exchange a glance with my friends. "We have an apartment awaiting you."

I followed him silently, but my heart cleared somewhat when I saw him begin to mount a narrow stair. I had feared that I was to be buried in some dungeon underground,—anything were better than that,—to be shut away from the pure air and bright sunshine! So it was even with a certain cheerfulness that I went up the stair behind him. Up, up we went steadily, until at last I saw we had reached the top. Drouet paused before a little door secured by three bolts sunk deep into the masonry. He threw them back slowly, one by one, that I might contemplate their strength, then pulled the door open.

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"Enter," he said, and I stooped and stepped within.

He stood looking after me a moment, then swung the door shut, and I heard him throwing the bolts into place with the same malicious deliberation. Then all was still.

I was in the topmost chamber of the tower looking towards the east—over the town and out across the plain. It was a little room, with walls of great stones there could be no removing, but there was a small window, too narrow, indeed, to permit the passage of my body, and barred with heavy iron, yet wide enough to admit a breath of fresh air and a stream of sunshine. I went to it and stood looking far out across the valley. The fields, the houses, the strip of woods along a little river were cameoed by the bright sunshine and the clear, pure air of the south. But my thoughts were heavy ones, and kept my eyes from perceiving the full beauty of the scene.

As I stood looking so, my eyes caught the movement of a body of men along a road afar off. I watched them listlessly at first, thinking them some mob of peasants en route to a market or merry-making, but as they drew nearer I saw that they

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were mounted, and then the sunlight was caught on glittering armor, on burnished hilts and gleaming spear-points. It was a troop of men armed cap-à-pie—and my heart leaped at the sudden thought that this might be M. le Comte himself—too late by an hour!

Breathlessly I watched them as they drew nearer—I could see that they numbered some three hundred, that they were well mounted and well accoutred. Some of the people of Marleon came out to look at them, and then, after a glance, went hastily in again, closing the gates behind them. I could see them running through the streets, and a noise of many voices floated upward to me, confused and indistinct. Plainly there was something about this troop of horse which caused the good people of the town much uneasiness.

The troop came on slowly and with a certain impressiveness. Just at the city wall they stopped, and then there came mounting to my ears a trumpet's clear note of defiance. A pennant was thrown out upon the breeze,—it hung a moment limp, then the wind caught its folds and stretched it so that all might see—azure; on a bend or, a laurel-tree sinople,—the arms of Cadillac!

CHAPTER IX

THE DEN OF THE WOLF

How my heart leaped as I saw that blazon! And then, in an instant, it fell again, for what could three hundred men,—yes, or three thousand men,—be they brave as Bayard, hope to accomplish against this castle in the air? Roquefort might sit on the battlement and laugh at them. True, they might starve him out in the course of months, if their patience could last so long, but ere that Roquefort would have had his will of me and d'Aurilly of Mademoiselle Valérie. Had they been but an hour earlier!

So I watched them with gloomy face as they drew away from the walls and pitched their camp a little distance down the valley, at the crest of a small hill. Evening was at hand, and the shadows, deepening first at the foot of the valley, stole silently up the hill-sides until all the world below me was wrapped in darkness. Through my window I could see a broad strip of sky, with a galaxy of

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stars twinkling brightly in it, and I knew that the night was a fair, sweet, clear one. If only Claire and I might wander through it with none but the stars for company!

Soon the fires of the camp gleamed out, first one and then another, and finally many of them. To right and left of the camp beacons were lighted to guard against surprise, and I knew that M. le Comte was preparing for any fortune. In the town too a light shone here and there, and the murmur which floated up from the streets proved that the town-people had not yet done with discussing the advent of this new enemy.

A noise at the door brought me from the window. I heard the bolts thrown back, the door opened, and Drouet appeared on the threshold, bearing a flickering lantern in one hand and a plate of bread and meat and can of water in the other. These he set upon the floor, and with a not unfriendly gesture motioned me to them. In faith, I was hungry enough, and needed no second bidding! Drouet placed his lantern on the floor and sat down opposite me. For a time he watched me in silence, as though enjoying the sight of my hunger, but I knew that he could not keep

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silence long, for I had already proved his love of gossip.

"I dare say you saw that little show down yonder," he remarked at last. "Cadillac would better have remained at home. Here he can only starve. He will find scant forage in these hills."

"You do not know M. le Comte," I retorted with a confidence I confess I did not feel. "He will smoke you out of this hole yet, and then 'twill be time to say your prayers. Possibly you have already felt his hand and so know its weight."

Drouet smiled somewhat ruefully.

"Possibly," he admitted; "yet if he venture to assault this place, he nor his men will see Cadillac again."

At the bottom of my heart I believed him, but I held my smile.

"Yet he has his points," he continued after a moment. "He sent a warning to M. le Duc just now, threatening I know not what if the girl and you two youngsters were not surrendered unharmed forthwith. You should have seen M. le Duc's face! He sent back a warm message too. 'Tell your master,' he said to the envoy, 'I propose to change Mademoiselle de Cadillac into Madame

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d'Aurilly. We will then make such treaty as we see fit to prevent d'Aurilly wearying of his wife. This spy from Marsan is going to bawl his life out on the rack. As for the other, I have not yet decided.' And the envoy went away to deliver this pretty news. One can imagine how Cadillac will receive it! How those two hate each other! France is not wide enough to hold them both."

"And when is this marriage to take place?" I asked, affecting to pass over that portion of the message which concerned myself, though it struck me to the heart.

"Soon," and Drouet winked. "You see, M. d'Aurilly is hungering to possess this pretty piece of womanhood—it seems he is even in love with her! To-morrow, perhaps, or next day. M. le Duc is a man who never delays, and he has a priest here who is most obliging."

"The King," I cried, "will have something to say to that! There are rumors of strange plots which affect your master. He may go too far!"

But Drouet only laughed.

"Paris is a long way off," he said, "and the King has much that concerns him nearer home. Besides, this castle could set at naught even a

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King's army, should any be brought against it, which is most unlikely. But in all this rush of events do not despair—you will not be forgotten. M. le Duc himself will wish to see you ere long," and he chuckled to himself as he picked up his lantern and moved towards the door.

For an instant I burned to spring upon him, to pull him down, to kill him with his own poniard. But there was doubtless a sentry in the corridor, who could wing me with a single musket shot—not yet—not yet—and I let him pass. I must first find a plan—a plan. Come, what were my wits for?

I lay down on my pallet in one corner to think it over. But what a problem! To escape from this stronghold in the air, with only one's bare hands to aid! It was too much for even a Marsan's cunning!

A musket-shot far down the hill brought me out of my thoughts and to my feet. It was followed by another and another, and as I rushed to my window I fancied I could hear a chorus of yells, as of men fighting hand to hand. The cries rose and fell and died away—then a tremendous explosion shook the earth. Far below me I saw a great spurt of flame shoot upward, and I knew that M. le Comte

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was blowing in the gates of Marleon. At least, he could make himself master of the town. There was for a few moments a renewal of the fighting, and then all was still again.

I thought the attack over, and was just turning to rest when there came another burst of firing from behind the hill—M. le Comte was trying to force the castle! The firing waxed and waned and died away. I listened in vain for any further outcry. Plainly, he had been repulsed, and seeing how desperate the road was, had not ventured a second assault. Would he ever venture it, I wondered! He loved his daughter, to be sure, yet would it not be the purest folly to dash himself to pieces against this rock in the attempt to rescue her? What could he hope to accomplish? And whenever Roquefort scented danger, could he not threaten reprisals on Mademoiselle herself? Better to draw off, to leave Mademoiselle to such fate as Roquefort had prepared for her, and wait another day, when, by some ruse or sudden ambuscade, Roquefort and d'Aurilly might be made to pay drop for drop!

Weighted with such bitter thoughts, I lay down again upon my pallet and this time dropped asleep. Nor did I waken till some one shook me roughly,

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and I opened my eyes to see Drouet standing above me and full day peering in at the window.

"God's blood!" he cried, "but you sleep soundly! Here, get up and eat. You will need your strength this day!"

I got to my feet and looked at him.

"And why?" I questioned, as carelessly as I could, for there was a menace in his words that startled me.

"Because you are to have a little interview with Mother Brodequin and others of her family."

"Mother Brodequin?" I repeated.

"Yes," and he bent over towards one foot and made a gesture as of tightening a screw. "You understand? 'Tis our pet name for her. She is not lovely to look at, but she has a tight embrace."

I understood, and I found my craving for the food suddenly vanished. I protest I am no coward—but the boot—the rack—I knew not what horrors lay before me. 'Twas enough to chill the courage of any man. Still, I made pretence of eating that Drouet might not see my terror.

"I heard some shots last night," I said at last. "Was there an attack?"

"Hardly that," he laughed. "Cadillac tried to

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crawl up the road, but was soon glad to scuttle down again. He will not try it a second time unless he is madder than I think him."

"But he gained the town," I said.

"The town, yes. But the town is nothing. M. le Duc never deigns to assist in its defence; its walls are down in a dozen places. That was no victory. He will never take the castle."

I quite agreed, but held my tongue.

"M. le Duc holds the upper hand," he added exultantly. "How he will squeeze Cadillac dry ere he is done with him! But there, I must go. Somehow when I am with you I run to gossip. But then you will talk so little in this world!"

"When is this interview to take place?" I asked.

"Soon," and he laughed. "There are certain preparations to be made, but they will not take long," and, still laughing, he was gone.

I gazed about the cell helplessly. Was there no way out? Must I fall victim to this monster of a Roquefort? To fall in fair fight, in warm blood, in the open day, were nothing—a man could go to death then gladly. But slowly, in a dark cellar, with others looking on exulting—ugh! I felt my nerves quivering at the horror of the thought—and

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then, with set teeth, I put the weakness from me. Other men—yes, and women—had gone to the same fate with smiling lips—why not I, a Marsan?

So when Drouet opened the door again he found me looking from my window down upon M. le Comte's camp, and I flatter myself that he was surprised at the calmness of my greeting.

"You will follow me, Monsieur," he said in a tone somewhat repressed. Perhaps even he was beginning to pity me.

"Willingly," I answered, and after him I went, out into the hall, where two sentries fell in behind me, down the stair, across a gloomy interior court to a great stone tower standing somewhat detached, then down another stair. I felt my head grow giddy as we left behind us the good air and the bright sunshine—perhaps I was nevermore to see them, or to see them only from a racked and crooked body. But again I caught my manhood back to me and went on down the stair with a step tolerably firm.

A torch was blazing at the foot, lighting partially a dismal passage which seemed to lead into the very bowels of the earth. Down this Drouet turned, and paused, at last, before a door.

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"This is the place," he said in a low tone. "Enter," and he opened the door and stood aside.

I noted how thick it was, how heavy—plainly no cry, however shrill and agonized, could pierce it. For an instant the thought came to me to hurl myself upon my guards, to tear them by the throat until they should be forced to kill me—that would be the easier way. Yet—oh, heart of youth!—perhaps beyond the door there were not certain death—there might yet be a chance—and life was sweet!

So I stepped across the threshold and heard the door swing shut behind me.

CHAPTER X

THE QUESTION

Two torches blazing from brackets in the wall at the farther end threw fantastic shadows along the floor and up against the ceiling. For an instant, as I looked at them, my eyes were dazzled, and then I saw that on a platform below the lights sat Roquefort and by his side d'Aurilly. A dozen men-at-arms stood guard, with something sinister and threatening in their very immobility, and in the corner to one side I caught a glimpse of an array of great, shapeless things, whose uses I did not permit my thoughts to dwell upon.

"This way, sirrah!" called Roquefort, and then sat silent until I stood before him, the torchlight full upon my face. It was then I understood why the torches were so placed—the face of the judge in shadow—the face of the prisoner in full light. How many had stood so and felt those eyes probing deep into their souls! For even from the shadow I could catch the menacing gleam of those serpent's eyes.

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"Well, M. de Marsan," he began at last, "it seems that Cadillac could not save you after all, despite your lying."

"Not yet, Monsieur," I answered, still with some show of confidence.

"Not yet!" he cried. "Body of God! Think you there is yet a chance? Three shots, last night, drove him headlong back into the plain. Why, Monsieur, he would be too late were he thundering at the gate this instant!"

I saw d'Aurilly leering down at me, all his malicious joy in his hawk-face, and the sight fired my blood.

"At least," I said, "I shall die an honest man, and neither a spy, a traitor, nor an abductor of women!"

D'Aurilly started from his seat with an oath, and in an instant I should have had my fingers at his throat, but that Roquefort held him back.

"No, no," he laughed. "Restrain yourself, d'Aurilly. That were too swift a way. One blow of a sword and it is over—but the rack is different. I wonder at you, my friend!"

"True!" muttered d'Aurilly, and sank back into his seat with livid face.

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"I see you have not yet forgotten that blow of my hand across your mouth, Monsieur," I sneered, resolved to provoke him to the uttermost. Pray Heaven I might yet get my hands on this devil and have a moment in which to settle my account with him! Then almost could I die content.

His hands were trembling on the arms of his chair, but he glared at me without replying.

"Ho, what is this tale, d'Aurilly?" questioned Roquefort. "Do you tell me that this rascal struck you in the face and lives to boast of it? I thought you a man of spirit!"

"He lies!" cried d'Aurilly. "He lies! It was nothing."

I looked at him, smiling. Roquefort, I think, could guess where the truth lay, but he passed it by.

"Come, M. de Marsan," he said more sternly, "we are wasting time, and I have much to do this day. You will remember the reward I promised you should you betray me at Cadillac," and he made a little gesture towards the horrors in the corner. "Well, the reward is ready; but since then I have learned certain things which may perhaps alter matters. In the first place, I learned from the Vicomte d'Aurilly that you carried to your

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master at Montauban a message which told of my little expedition against Cadillac. This message, it seems, was brought to you at Marsan by some member of my household. In the second place, I learned from Drouet, as you know, that some one in the night had come to your aid, had cut the ropes which bound you to him, and that you were within an ace of escaping."

He paused for a moment. I could guess what was coming.

"D'Aurilly has been good enough to represent me in Cadillac's household, not caring, at first, to trust me to secure for him that black-eyed Valérie, but preferring to rely on his own charms. Well, it appears his charms had no great effect, so, in the end, he was glad to come to me for aid," and Roquefort looked at his companion with just a spark of malice in his eyes. "It was not until he had managed to join my troop in that brush at Cadillac that I learned the truth—that we have a spy and traitor amongst us. I had suspected it before, when my plans had come to naught, but proof was always lacking. Well, Monsieur, I desire the name of that traitor."

On that point, at least, I could answer fully.

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"M. le Duc," I said, "I do not know his name. I do not even know his appearance. I know only that one night a man rode into Marsan carrying a message which he gave to my father, who, in turn, entrusted it to me. I saw the man but a moment; it was night, and his face was so well concealed that I caught but a glimpse of it."

Roquefort was glaring down at me, his mouth working.

"Doubtless the person who cut your bonds the other night was also invisible!" he cried. "Or did you, by any chance, see his face, M. de Marsan?"

My blood leaped back into my heart. I looked into his eyes horrified—seeing myself at the edge of a precipice.

"Well, Monsieur," said Roquefort after a moment, "I await an answer. Come, your tongue is not so ready."

The sweat broke out across my forehead as I stood there looking at him. I thought bitterly of the hopes that had sat on my saddle-bow as I rode out from Montauban—it seemed hard that they should end like this. But if Fate willed it—what then? Certainly, I had done my best.

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"M. le Duc," I answered, with what calmness I could, "I have nothing more to say."

His face turned purple and his eyes became two sparks of fire, miniaturizing the torches which blazed behind him, yet his voice was calm.

"Remember my warning, Monsieur," he said. "I am not a man who breaks his word. Either you must be stretched yonder in a moment—or this spy. I swear it! I have suffered too much from him to pass it by. There is no other way—even your Gascon wits cannot devise one."

I looked from him to d'Aurilly and back again. There was no mercy in either countenance—only d'Aurilly exulted openly. And the thought came to me that I might yet save Mademoiselle from the fate that threatened her and win for myself an easy death. There was no time to hesitate.

Perhaps he saw me gather for the spring or read my thought in my eyes, for he gave a little cry and started from his chair even as my foot was on the first step of the platform. But I was on him before he could get his poniard out—my fingers clutched at his throat with all the frenzied eagerness of hate—and we crashed backward over the chair together.

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I heard a confused shouting, a rush of many feet, but I saw only the working face before me, with its staring eyes, its gaping mouth, with the swollen, quivering tongue within. God! what a lust of blood was on me as I gripped his throat and crushed it! I knew he was fumbling for his dagger—I knew that in an instant a sword-thrust from behind would end it—yet it seemed ages before they were upon me.

“God’s blood! Pull him up!” yelled Roquefort, and they jerked me to my feet; but d’Aurilly came with me too, for my fingers were set as death itself would set them.

I felt the others working at them, but my teeth were set—this man was mine! They should not take him from me! But Roquefort himself strode up at last, and ran a dagger-point under my fingers, prying them back and cutting them cruelly. Only I did not then feel the hurt—my whole soul was in the gaze I bent upon d’Aurilly as he lay huddled there before me—if only he were dead! if only he were dead! Then might I go in peace to my own death!

“Bring Briquet!” called Roquefort, “and quick about it.”

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In a moment a figure entered from the dark corner.

"Here is work for you," said Roquefort, and pointed to the man on the floor.

The surgeon bent over him for a moment, felt his wrist, and looked into his eyes. Then he stood up again.

"There is work for the grave-digger, not for me, M. le Duc," he said. "You twisted the necklet a shade too tightly."

"Necklet!" repeated Roquefort, strangled by rage. "Body of God! It was no necklet—'twas yonder scoundrel's fingers!"

Briquet turned and looked at me with a little air of curiosity.

"They must be strong ones," he observed, simply.

But Roquefort's rage had quite mastered him.

"We shall see!" he yelled. "We shall test every muscle of him! Remain here, Briquet—I want the end deferred as long as it may be! To the rack with him!"

I strained to hurl from me the scoundrels who held me to right and left, but they were doubtless accustomed to the work, for they threw me by

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some trick of wrestling, and, seizing me by arm, leg, thigh, and body, bore me into the shadows of the farther corner.

If ever man fought to save himself, I fought then, but I had no chance—I saw it in a moment. First one arm, then the other, was strapped down above my head, and in an instant I felt the straps drawn tight about my ankles. I strained at them till I thought my heart would burst, but they held quite firm. Then, with white fear at my throat, I lay still and waited. I could do no more!

They brought the torches and stuck them into brackets in the wall above me, where they would illumine every line of my face. Roquefort took his place at the foot, whence he could look down into my eyes. Briquet stationed himself beside me and looked at me as one interested in a new experiment. Plainly his heart had been hardened by a hundred such spectacles. And yet, as I stared up at him, I fancied I saw in his eyes a look of encouragement. Where had I seen that face before? Somewhere, surely!

“Is all ready?” asked Roquefort.

The men grunted an assent.

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He looked at me again, and read something in my eyes I would not have had him see there.

“I think we shall yet learn the name of the spy,” he sneered. “I think we shall soon have this scoundrel’s soul bare before us! Turn the wheel, men!”

CHAPTER XI

ROQUEFORT'S PRICE

I HEARD the wheel creak round, and a sudden spasm of pain shot through elbows, shoulders, and hips as the ropes tightened. I set my teeth to stifle back the cry I knew the next turn must wring from me, and glanced up at Roquefort leering down at me. Thank God, I had settled accounts with that other devil! He, at least, was not there to gloat over my agony! This one I must leave to M. le Comte.

"Well, M. de Marsan," he drawled, "are you yet ready to tell me the name of the spy? Think well before you answer. Your present position is not an easy one, perhaps, but it is a bed of roses compared to what it will be when that wheel has been turned twice more."

I bit my lips to keep back the curses that rose to them.

"Come, you are obdurate," said Roquefort after a moment. "Briquet, explain to him the effect of turning the wheel twice more."

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"The first turn will dislocate the shoulders," said Briquet in a tone of professional indifference.

"The second turn will dislocate the hips."

The voice!—where had I heard it? I stared up at him! I could have sworn there was white hate in the look he bent upon his master.

"And the third turn, Briquet?" urged Roquefort.

"The third turn will render the dislocations permanent by tearing away the gristle which binds bone to bone—ball to socket."

I felt my heart grow cold with terror. Had God a hell to fit such devils? Yet other men had borne it—day after day they had borne it, and still smiled. Well, I would bear it too!

"So you will not speak?" asked Roquefort, reading my defiance in my eyes. "As you will. Only, I warn you, you are playing the fool, M. de Marsan," and he turned to give the signal to the men at the wheel.

But the signal was not given. Even as he turned, the outer door was flung back and hurrying feet dashed into the chamber and across it towards us. Every one stared, astounded, to see who this might be that set at naught Roquefort's orders. Not

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until they came full within the circle of light from the torches could I see them—and how my heart leaped, for I looked up into Claire's eyes, and back of her saw Brissac's anxious face.

"We are in time," she said in a voice almost a whisper. "Thank God! Loose that wheel, you scoundrels!"

Mechanically, without thinking from whom the order came, they permitted the wheel to spin back. What a blessed relief it was!

Then she turned to Roquefort with blazing eyes.

"You are a brute—a monster!" she cried. "Oh, I did well to think twice before taking you for a husband!"

I could not keep back the cry that burst to my lips. So that story Fronsac had told me was true! But she merely glanced at me and turned again to Roquefort, who was watching her with eyes inflamed by passion.

"It was only by the merest chance I learned a moment since what devil's work was toward here," she went on. "You will release him at once, Monsieur."

But Roquefort only laughed.

"My faith," he said, "how beautiful you are

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once you get in a passion! Come, Claire, you must be mine, after all! Only I can esteem you as you deserve! I am not milk and water—I can meet fire with fire!”

She looked at him with scornful eyes.

“Are you going to continue in this coward’s work?” she asked.

He saw the contempt in her look and it stung him.

“Mademoiselle,” he said coldly, his face growing stern, “this is something that is no concern of yours. This fellow knows of the existence of one spy, and perhaps of two, in my household. I propose to turn that wheel until their names are wrung from him.”

“And this to the man who saved your honor!” she sneered. “Your gratitude is truly princely, M. le Duc!”

Roquefort stared at her, amazed.

“My honor?” he repeated. “I do not understand, Mademoiselle. What is this riddle?”

She looked at her uncle over her shoulder, and something in her eyes brought him forward. But his face was livid—plainly, he did not relish this bearding of the lion.

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"Permit me to explain, M. le Duc," he said. "You will remember that I told you of the attack upon me at Montauban, which would inevitably have secured from me certain papers but for the assistance which came to me opportunely."

Roquefort nodded grimly.

"I remember," he said. "Go on."

"Well, M. le Duc, I did not tell you the name of our rescuer, not thinking that it would interest you and not knowing at the time that he was a prisoner. It was not until Claire came to me just now and told me that I knew. Then I hastened here, that you also might know. M. le Duc, the man who saved your papers lies there on the rack before you!"

Roquefort stared at him a moment and then down on me.

"This fellow!" he stammered, as though not believing his ears. "But he is one of Cadillac's men!"

"He saved us," said Brissac quickly, "not asking which side we served—seeing only that we were in deadly peril."

"And that the girl was pretty," added the other,

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glancing at her keenly. "I can read the story—it is an old one among you Gascons."

"At any rate, he saved us, M. le Duc," interrupted Brissac with a touch of impatience.

"Yes, he saved you, perhaps," assented Roquefort, "but he refuses to answer my questions. I am grateful for the one; the other I cannot forgive. He must be made to answer."

I saw Brissac flush darkly and Claire grow pale. You may well conceive with what intentness I stared up at this scene—with what agony of earnestness I watched the face of each of the actors in it.

"What are these questions, M. le Duc?" asked Brissac at last.

"The first is—the name of the man who sent a message from here to Marsan, which this fellow carried to Montauban. He says he did not see the messenger—at least, not his face—and that he does not know his name. But the other question cannot be evaded so easily. I want the name of the person who, three nights since, cut the bonds which held him to Drouet."

I saw the blood sweep in a wave from Claire's face as she came slowly forward. I understood

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what she was about to do, and implored her with my eyes not to speak, but she did not even glance at me.

"Do you mean, M. le Duc," she asked, in a voice strained by emotion, "that if you have the name of this person you will release M. de Marsan?"

Roquefort glanced at her, surprised by her emotion.

"Perhaps," he said. "I had sworn to have his life, but the story you have told me counts in his favor."

"Then, M. le Duc," she said firmly, "learn that I am the person. M. de Marsan chose not to betray me, but I can betray myself."

I could feel the force with which Roquefort gripped the bottom of the rack to steady himself under the blow.

"You!" he cried. "You!" and he glared at her with blood-shot eyes. "Name of God! But this is beyond endurance! You—Claire de Brissac, whom I have honored with the offer of my hand—a traitor!"

"Not a traitor, M. le Duc," she protested proudly. "I sought merely to save the life of a

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man who had saved my uncle's. I am still seeking to do so. Surely I have succeeded!"

But Roquefort was looking down at me and did not answer.

"Tell me, M. de Marsan," he said at last, "is this pretty story true—this story of the rescue?"

"Quite true, M. le Duc."

"And did Cadillac know?"

"He recognized me at once, Monsieur. So did Letourge. He was in bed——"

"In bed?" queried Roquefort, surprised.

"In bed—yes. It was he whom Mademoiselle struck across the face with a white-hot iron. He will always wear the scar."

"And he did not hang you?"

"He was about to, Monsieur. Only, in the end, he determined to prove whether I or d'Aurilly were the traitor."

Roquefort looked across the room where the traitor's body lay, a dark heap on the platform.

"Ah, yes, I had forgot," he murmured. Then he turned to Claire. "Mademoiselle," he said, "since you answer yourself, I quite absolve M. de Marsan, and out of gratitude for that exploit of his am ready to release him."

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I heard Claire breathe a sigh of relief as he paused; but I saw the devil in his eyes. I knew that the end was not yet.

"Unfortunately," he went on, "there is another count against M. de Marsan—a very grave count. Look yonder, on the platform, Mademoiselle; do you see that thing lying there? An hour since, that was the Vicomte d'Aurilly—now it is a mere heap of carrion. It was M. de Marsan who sprang upon him and wrought the transformation, and M. de Marsan must answer for it."

"A coward and a traitor, Monsieur," breathed the girl, "not worthy a second thought."

"A coward and a traitor, perhaps," assented Roquefort; "but, nevertheless, my guest and killed within my house."

I read the implacable purpose in his voice—so did the others, and I saw Claire steadying herself against the wall. How I loved her! And I devoured her sweet face with my eyes. It would be easy to go to death with that image in my heart!

She stood a moment so, looking down at me, her eyes dark with horror. What eyes they were! And Roquefort was looking at her too, reading her heart.

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"Kindly take Mademoiselle to her apartments, Brissac," he said at last. "She will not care to witness what is to follow."

So the moment had come!

"Adieu, Mademoiselle," I said as calmly as I could. "It is to be adieu this time, it seems. You have done what you could to save me, and I shall die quite happy, knowing that you care. Only," I added, with a smile I could not make wholly tearless, "it would have been good to live, knowing it—for I love you, Mademoiselle. Pardon my saying it here, before these others—but I must say it—I want you to think of me always as loving you."

Her lips were trembling and her eyes bright with tears. God! To live—life would be worth something now!

"M. le Duc," she asked at last, in a choking voice, "is there no price which will prevent this murder?"

He looked from her to me and back again. I saw hot desire leap to life in his eyes as he gazed at her—her face, her arms, the poise of her figure!

"Only one, Mademoiselle," he answered very quietly.

"And what is that, Monsieur?"

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Again he looked at her, dwelling on her beauty, her girlishness, her innocence.

"That is yourself, Mademoiselle."

I started from the rack, but the straps held me back.

"Mademoiselle," I cried, hot with rage, "I forbid such a sacrifice—you wife to this scoundrel! His worst with me must be less hideous than that!"

But Roquefort waved me to silence.

"Understand, Mademoiselle," he said quietly, "that I make you the offer of my hand only out of courtesy, because I want you to come willingly to my bed. I have a passion for you—I desire you—and I am going to possess you! Heretofore, since your uncle was too weak to command you, I have urged my suit discreetly. Hereafter I shall carry it with a high hand. You are, self-confessed, a traitor to me, and I can do with you as I please. I have the right over you of justice, high and low! Yet I am generous—yet still do I offer you the title of Madame la Duchesse de Roquefort, and your lover's life besides. There are few women who would need to be asked twice. Nor do I intend to ask you twice, Mademoiselle. I am weary of your

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indifference. You will choose now whether you will be my wife willingly, or——”

His glance finished the sentence. She understood—so did Brissac—white-livered coward, why did he not strike the scoundrel down where he stood! I jerked at the straps in an agony of rage. His wife or his mistress! A pretty choice!

“But, M. le Duc,” began Brissac, in sickly protest.

Roquefort turned slowly and looked at him, with eyes red with malignant menace. Brissac stood silent, with twitching lips. Yes, he was a coward, as Fronsac had said.

Then Roquefort turned again to the girl.

“I await your answer, Mademoiselle,” he said with a sinister calmness.

She looked about for a moment helplessly, as though seeking some way of escape. There was only one that I could see—and I cursed the straps that held me helpless there! If only God would grant it me to kill this monster!

“Mademoiselle,” I began, “Claire!” and then stopped—what could I advise? Yet the thought of her in that devil’s arms maddened me.

She looked at me for an instant—at the hard bed

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on which I lay—at the men ready at the wheel—then her eyes swept back to Roquefort.

“M. le Duc,” she said quite calmly, “I accept. Only, I warn you, you will get no loving wife.”

He bowed to her with infinite politeness. The scoundrel was not without his points. He could meet fire with fire, as he had said!

“All that will come after,” he retorted, with an infernal smile. “I assure you that you will find me a loving husband. As to your lover—I will take care to protect myself from him!”

He looked down at me, the smile still on his lips.

“But the arrangements,” he continued after a moment. “I must acquaint you with them, Mademoiselle. We were to have had a wedding to-morrow morning, only, unfortunately, the bridegroom lies dead yonder. Well, we will have the wedding, only it will be you and I who take the vows. You agree?”

Her face became more livid as she saw how near was her martyrdom, but there was no relenting in his features. She nodded faintly.

“Very well,” he said approvingly, “that is right, Mademoiselle. Make the best of it. I am not such a monster as you seem to think. I am a man, like

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any other, and have my generous moments. I hasten to order the arrangements. As for Mademoiselle de Cadillac, I must select her another husband from among my followers. Permit me to conduct you to your room, Mademoiselle. As soon as we are safe outside, this fellow will be released and taken back to his tower. Immediately after the wedding he shall be returned to Cadillac unharmed. I swear it on my honor. Does that satisfy you?"

Again she nodded, and Roquefort paused for a moment to look down at me.

"My faith, M. de Marsan," he laughed, "you look as though you were itching to treat me as you did d'Aurilly."

"God will yet give me the chance!" I answered, between my teeth.

He laughed again and led the girl to the door, leaving me jerking convulsively at my straps.

CHAPTER XII

A MESSAGE FROM WITHOUT

I LAY for some hours in my cell, dazed by this new misfortune, nursing my aching muscles and smarting fingers. I had, it is true, saved Mademoiselle Valérie from the most immediate danger which threatened her, but only to hurl her into an abyss more frightful. For Roquefort had said that he would soon select another man to wed her,—one of his followers, no doubt; base-born, vulgar, low, more odious even than d'Aurilly,—so that in the end she must fare worse than ever. For a moment I found it in my heart to regret that I had killed d'Aurilly, then the memory of his great villainies came back to me and the regret passed. Earth were well rid of him!

After a time Drouet brought my dinner, and inquired with pretended solicitude about my injuries. I told him they were not worth speaking of, though my fingers were very sore from the dagger-cut and my muscles still ached abominably. He saw I

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was in no mood for talk and soon left me to myself.

I had no relish for the food, and went to the window in the faint hope that I might see some promise of assault in M. le Comte's camp below, but the hope died as I looked down at it. The force was still there, indeed, but the men were sprawled here and there in little groups and the horses were grazing along the slope. He had not taken possession of the town, preferring, doubtless, to levy upon the inhabitants for supplies and leave them the possession of their houses. Besides, in the town there was danger of surprise or betrayal. Yonder on the hill-top there was none.

But I could guess how M. le Comte was eating his heart out gazing at this fortress on a cliff and wondering what had befallen his daughter.

It is not an easy thing for a man who has ordered life ever as he pleased to sit down quietly and accept defeat. Yet had he ten times the men, success had been far off as ever.

I was about to turn away when I heard a little rustling on the wall outside the window, and saw that it was caused by a piece of paper dangling at the end of a string. It was jerked vigorously back

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and forth. In a second I understood. Some one on the parapet, just over me, was trying to attract my attention. Plainly, the paper was for me. I strained my arm through the window and at last managed to grasp it. With fast-beating heart I drew it in and took it from the string, which was jerked away as soon as I released it. Then I unfolded the paper and read. The note ran:

“Monsieur, I have learned of your demeanor at the question and am grateful, for I am he who brought the warning to Marsan. While it is true you do not know my name, I am sure, nevertheless, that you might have pointed me out had you wished to do so. To-night I think I can aid you, and also the others. At six o'clock Drouet will bring you your supper. Detain him in talk until the guards are changed, which will be perhaps ten minutes. Then put him for a moment off his guard, seize his poniard, and kill him. This will require courage and address, which I am certain you possess. There is a sentry in the corridor, but you need not fear him, as I will see that he does not trouble you. In the cell below yours M. de Fronsac is quartered. Drouet will have the key to the door somewhere about him, since he delivers M. de Fronsac's supper before coming up to you. He will doubtless have also the other keys to the tower.

“At seven o'clock Mademoiselle de Cadillac will come out for her usual evening walk upon the parapet, which she is permitted to take alone. There is, however, a sentry at either end of the parapet. These you will have to silence.

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"After she has joined you, descend at once to the bottom of the east tower—the one in which you are. A flight of steps runs down into the rock. Descend these. At the bottom you will find a small door, heavily barred. You will see this opens on the face of the cliff, and if you look attentively, you will discern little steps scratched in the rock. By means of a rope to steady one's self, these steps may be descended. The rope is kept always lying by the door. The great difficulty will be to get the door open. Only Roquefort himself has the keys, and you will have to break it down. This will be no easy task, but the sentry's musket may prove of service. As the watches are changed at six o'clock your escape will probably not be discovered until midnight, so that you will have six hours in which to work. Much may be accomplished in that time. If you succeed, commend me to M. le Comte."

You can conceive with what joy I read this message, with its plan of escape so admirably mapped out. At first glance it seemed quite easy, but as I considered it various difficulties appeared. However, I am not one who borrows trouble, and I put these doubts behind me. For, after all, here was hope in place of black despair—hope—and then, of a sudden, I saw that it was not hope at all—at least, not for me. We might escape,—we three,—but what of Claire? Would I not be deserting her to the mercy of this monster who

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knew no mercy? Well, we should see. At the worst, I could seek out this devil, sword in hand, and cut him down ere he could summon aid. I could see the others safely down the cliff and then turn back upon my errand. That would mean death for me also—but if there were no other way, it would at least save Claire from the insult of his caresses.

I read the message through a second time, and found myself wondering—who was this traitor in Roquefort's household? No ordinary man, certainly, and one who kept his secret well. I knew so little of Roquefort's followers—and I had caught but a glimpse of the messenger's face. Well, M. le Comte would reward him.

Those hours of waiting were the longest I have ever known. I was eager to strike in the first flush of confidence,—that is ever my way, for I grow timid, sometimes, on second thought,—but now I must worry through three mortal hours. Worry through them I did, somehow—but it was with quivering nerves I heard Drouet at last throw the bolts. As the door opened, I caught a glimpse of the sentry in the corridor. Drouet set my platter on the floor.

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"There's your supper," he said.

"And the last that I shall eat here," I added laughingly. "Will you not be sorry to bid me adieu?"

"Bid you adieu?" he asked. "How is that?"

"I am to be released to-morrow morning," I explained, "so soon as M. le Duc and Mademoiselle de Brissac are married. He has given his word."

"So he is to have her at last, is he?" grinned Drouet. "Well, my faith, he has waited long enough. Had I been he, I would have had her months ago, and without troubling for a priest's blessing. That is the safest way, for he may weary of her—he may in time see some one younger, fresher," and he leered at me in a way that sent the blood to my face.

"He has pursued her long, then?" I asked, with what indifference I could muster.

"Long! Since the day she came last spring from the Sacred Heart at Toulouse, where the good sisters were caring for her. He had no sooner set eyes on her than he was mad for her. At first we all thought we should have a new Duchesse within a month, for M. le Duc is not the man for a girl just out of a convent to resist; but some one whis-

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pered into her ear the story of the first Duchesse, and perhaps some other tales besides. What would not M. le Duc do to the tale-bearer could he discover him! The first Duchesse is dead—dead,” and he laughed a mocking laugh. “There was a story! She was found one morning at the cliff-foot here, broken to pieces! She had flung herself over, perhaps. There were those who said that M. le Duc had wearied of her, as he will weary of this one—that the fall was not wholly an accident. However that may have been, the girl refused to look at him after she had heard the story. She was just from the convent, you see—her conscience was yet warm. M. le Duc swore he would have her. Her indifference only inflamed him the more. Really, before this, I thought he would use the strong arm.”

“But her uncle,” I questioned. “What of him?”

“Brissac? Pouf!” and Drouet grimaced contemptuously. “A man of water fit only for intrigues, where one talks in parables. He fears M. le Duc as he fears the devil; and he also fears this girl, who has a will of her own, despite her baby face. So he stepped discreetly to one side and per-

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mitted them to fight it out. Well, M. le Duc will have his hands full. I do not envy him. I prefer a wench whom I need not fear will stab me while I sleep."

"Yes," I assented. My hands were trembling as I realized that the moment had arrived. I marked how his poniard hung—there would be need of quickness, for he was a great, heavy fellow, much stronger, doubtless, than I.

"I must go," he said at last. "I will drink your health at the wedding."

He got slowly to his feet and stepped towards the door. As he passed me, I strained forward, plucked out his poniard and drove it deep into his thigh. I might have struck higher, but at the last instant my heart failed me. I saw his startled eyes staring down at me, then he fell with a crash.

"Help!" he yelled. "This way!"

But I was upon him, the poniard at his throat.

"Drouet," I said between my teeth, "I spared you an instant since—I might easily have killed you. I swear I will kill you yet if you utter another sound."

He chuckled grimly as he looked towards the door.

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"Many thanks, M. de Marsan," he said, "but I think I have already uttered enough to spoil your game."

For an instant I found myself looking over my shoulder with anxious eyes—then I remembered.

"There is no one there, Drouet," I said triumphantly, rejoiced that it was my turn. "The sentry has been attended to."

"Attended to!" he muttered, and looked again towards the door and then at me with distended eyes. "It is a plot, then!"

"A plot—yes," I nodded. "But to business. You will turn over on your face, if you please."

He hesitated, and I compelled his obedience with a prod of the poniard. He turned over slowly, with many groans.

"Now cross your hands behind you."

The hands came back reluctantly.

I snatched his belt from about his waist and in a moment had the hands secure. I pulled on the belt until the blood seemed ready to burst from his finger-tips, for I could take no chances. A strip from his leathern jerkin served as a thong for his feet. I rolled him over.

"You see how much easier it would be for me

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to kill you than to take all this trouble," I remarked. "But I am merciful—I am no butcher. However, I wish to be quite safe, so I shall be compelled to gag you."

I tore another wide strip from his jerkin and stuffed his mouth full of the straw that had formed my pallet. It was not over clean, but was infinitely better than death. I bound the strip close over it and stood for a moment looking down at him.

"Ah," I said, remembering suddenly my instructions, "you have some keys somewhere about you. Let us see."

I knelt beside him, and in a moment had the keys—a great ring of them. As I arose I saw that he was making a frightful effort to speak.

"What is it," I asked, "the wound?"

He nodded violently.

I knelt again and looked at it. It was bleeding slightly, but did not seem of a serious nature.

"I will fix that for you," I said, and I bound a rag about it to stop the bleeding. "Now you are all right."

I realized that I was spending too much time over Drouet, and I hurried to the door and opened it. In the half-light I saw the sentry lying against

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the wall. As I dragged him into the cell I shuddered to see that his skull had been crushed by a single blow from behind. Evidently my ally did not share my tender nerves.

I placed him against the wall opposite Drouet, who stared at him with distended eyes, plainly understanding nothing of the mystery of his death.

"That would have been your fate," I said, "had any but I dealt with you. I wish you a pleasant night, Monsieur," and I left the cell, bolting the door behind me. Certainly it would take Roquefort some little time to get it open again and learn Drouet's story.

The corridor was very dark, but I groped my way to the spot where the sentry had fallen, picked up his musket, and made my way down to the floor below. There I found a torch burning, doubtless for the sentry's use. In a moment I was fumbling at the door of the cell there. Half a dozen keys I tried, and at last the lock turned. I threw the door open with feverish haste. Within, I saw a figure lying on a pallet in one corner.

"Fronsac!" I called. "Fronsac!"

He sprang towards me with a cry of amazement.

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"Is it you, Marsan? We are going to escape then?"

"We are going to try," I answered, as I returned the warm pressure of his hands. "Come, Monsieur, there is not a moment to lose."

"But Valérie?" he questioned, holding back. "I do not understand. What of her?"

"It is to her we go," I said. "We will take her with us."

His face lighted with a sudden joy.

"Ah, in that case," and he motioned me forward.

I did not wait a second bidding, for I knew that seven o'clock, the hour of her promenade, could not be far distant. I thrust into his hands the sentry's musket, caught up the torch, and led the way down the stair—two flights more there were, and then a door. I tried it. It was locked.

For a moment my heart sank. Then I bethought myself of Drouet's keys. I tried them, one after another—joy!—the bolt yielded! I opened the door cautiously, for fear some one might be within. I could hear Fronsac chafing on the step behind me, but this was no time for haste. Evening had come in earnest and the court upon which

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the door opened was so dark that I could perceive no one. I listened for a moment, but heard no sound save a stave of a drinking-song shouted afar off.

"Come," I said, "it seems safe. And we have always a place of refuge in this tower, and we reach it in time to bolt the door behind us."

"But Valérie," whispered Fronsac, "where is she?"

"I was told that at seven she would walk upon the parapet," I answered, and by a single impulse we raised our eyes to the heights above us.

I confess I started at what I saw there—Madoiselle Valérie, outlined against the red sky of the sunset, poised like a bird about to fly, gazing down at us. And at her side another figure—Roquefort.

CHAPTER XIII

THE WHEEL TURNS

WITH quivering nerves I dragged Fronsac back into the shadow of the wall. I was certain that Roquefort had seen us, but as the minutes passed and he made no sign, I remembered that looking down into darkness is a very different thing to looking up into light. So at last I stood watching him without fear of discovery.

He was talking to Mademoiselle Valérie with great earnestness, and while I could see repulsion swaying her from him, there was some wizardry in his words or manner that chained her to the spot. Her face was turned away from him, but he spoke with accompaniment of look and gesture as though she were returning his intent gaze. What was he explaining?—some deviltry, no doubt! And I remembered that when he left her side we must devise some way of getting to her. As I stood there staring up at them a thought leaped to life in my brain that set my nerves a-quiver—why could we

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not surprise him there at her side and hurl him over the battlement? Then would Claire, too, be released from danger.

But how to gain the parapet? I saw that it ran along a structure that stretched from the great east tower to a smaller one on the north. Perhaps from the tower there was a door that opened upon it.

But Fronsac of a sudden caught my arm.

"Look!" he cried between his teeth. "God's blood! Look!"

I looked and saw Mademoiselle start from her companion in anger, stung by his words; but he caught her arm almost fiercely, and drew her to him. I could see the white face she turned to right and left.

"I will end it," said Fronsac, and stepped from the shadow, musket to shoulder.

But I sprang after him and pulled it down.

"Not that!" I cried. "Not that! That would ruin everything! The garrison would be upon us in a moment!"

He looked at me with working face.

"What then?" he asked. "Quick, Marsan, what then?"

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"We must surprise him," I said. "We must gain the parapet. I too have an account to settle with that scoundrel!"

"But how?" he demanded. "Quick!"

"The tower!" I cried.

He hastened after me back to the door. I took care to lock it behind us—at least, we would be secure against surprise from that direction. Then we sped up the stair—up and up. At last, peering from one of the narrow windows, I saw we were on a level with the parapet, but there was no door—only the solid wall of stone.

Fronsac was cursing softly to himself.

"You should have let me end it down below!" he cried. "Now we shall be too late!"

"Come, there must be some way," I muttered in perplexity. "Let us go down a flight."

We retraced our steps, quivering with impatience. But a cry of joy burst from Fronsac as we gained the lower floor.

"There is a door!" he said.

And, sure enough, there it was—a little door of oak, set firmly in the masonry. I held the torch near it and examined it intently.

"Well, we must pause here," I said at last, "un-

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less, by chance, Drouet carried a key to this also. Let us see."

I ran rapidly through the bunch I had taken from him, trying one after another, but not one would throw back the bolt.

"Come, let us go down again," cried Fronsac. "I have still the musket," and he started down the stair.

I caught at the door and pulled at it savagely. It swung open in my hand.

Then I saw what fools we had been. Small wonder none of our keys would throw the bolt, since it was already thrown! Roquefort must have passed that way to gain the parapet. Then he must still be there! And my heart was beating savagely as we stole through the door and up a short flight of steps. In a moment I saw the stars above me and felt the fresh air of the night upon my face.

Darkness had come in earnest, and even here, high on the parapet, there was only the dim light of the stars. I feared that at the first turn we should run into a sentry, but we had no time to waste in hesitation.

"Do not fire!" I cautioned Fronsac. "What

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we do must be done silently," and gripping my poniard—Drouet's poniard—tightly, I stepped out. For a moment I could see nothing, and then, away in front of us, I caught a glimpse of two dim figures.

Fronsac saw them in the same instant, and would have sprung forward but that I held him back.

"Softly," I whispered. "Softly. We must surprise him, or he will outwit us yet. Give him an instant's warning, and he might hold us off till aid arrived. We must take no chances."

"As you will," he answered sullenly, and I saw he was hot to be at Roquefort as was I.

I crouched low into the shadow of the battlement, and, motioning Fronsac to follow, stole slowly forward. As we drew near I saw that Roquefort still held the girl by the arm.

"You will listen to reason," he was saying roughly. "Not to-morrow but the next day shall you be wedded. I will provide the man—and while he may not be a beauty, I am sure he will love you as you deserve. There is no way out, Mademoiselle, I swear it. I am not like to permit such a pretty bird to slip through my fingers."

She was looking at him now with defiant eyes.

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It was easy to see that the spirit of M. le Comte lived in her also.

"You are wasting words, Monsieur," she said quite coldly. "I have already told you my determination," and she made a little gesture towards the cliff. "A leap and it is over. Think you I should hesitate when I knew that on the other side lay a life-time of infamy? You do not know me, Monsieur!"

Roquefort laughed harshly.

"'Tis easy said, but not so easy done," he retorted. "Death is not pleasant when one looks it in the face. Besides, I shall take care of you. I shall see that this pretty flesh be not wasted in such a way. Some man must have it to wife first!"

I heard a low cry of rage behind me, and Fronsac leaped past me and upon this libertine. I saw Roquefort wheel sharp round at the sound of footsteps, but Fronsac was upon him ere he could draw his sword. The musket flashed in the air, but the other stepped lightly to one side and the blow fell harmless. Then I was upon him too.

Oh, but he was a man!—a match for both of us almost. I struck at his throat to drown the cry I knew would come, but he caught my wrist and

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held it in a grasp of iron. I felt him turning the point towards my breast, and struck madly at his face; then Fronsac's musket rose again, there was a sickening blow, and his grip upon my wrist relaxed. For a breath he stood staring wildly into my eyes, then slipped limply down at my feet upon the parapet.

"He is done!" panted Fronsac. "Curse him! He is done!"

"Yes," I said. "Yes," and looked down at him.

But my friend had turned towards the figure which stood sobbing softly against the wall.

"Valérie!" he called, and I saw her sway forward into his arms with a little answering cry. No more I saw, for I turned my back, as I would have others do when I meet my love after long absence and many perils. Yet I could spare them but a moment.

"We must go," I said, and touched Fronsac gently on the arm. "Come, Monsieur. For love you have a hundred to-morrows, but for escape only to-night."

He swung around upon me, and I could see how his eyes were shining.

"Marsan," he said out of a full heart, "I want

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you to know Mademoiselle de Cadillac—I must tell her how much we owe you.”

I looked into her eyes and saw love and joy flaming there. Verily, it was a good thing to have brought these two together!

“Valérie,” he added, “it is Marsan here who has saved us—who has devised this wonderful plan of escape——”

“It was not I at all, Mademoiselle,” I protested, but she silenced me with a little gesture.

“There!” she cried, and it was wonderful to see how fatigue and fear had slipped from her. “I quite know what to believe, M. le Marsan! Some time, perhaps, we may find a way to repay you.”

I bowed over the hand she gave me. Had I not known another, I might have found it in my heart to envy Fronsac.

“And I,” I said, “am happy in this chance to serve you. Besides, we have not yet escaped—we are not yet at the end of the journey. It is foolish to linger here. We must be going.”

“True,” said the girl, and came suddenly back to earth. “Lead on, Monsieur. We will follow.”

As we turned, I heard a groan at my feet.

“So he is not yet dead,” muttered Fronsac be-

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tween his teeth, and picked up his musket for another blow. "Well, we will finish it."

But I caught his arm and held it back.

"No, no," I protested. "Not that. He is not a man to kill here like a dog. Let us find some other way?"

"What other way can there be?" demanded my friend impatiently.

"We must not leave him lying here for the sentries to stumble over," I said. "We must conceal him somewhere."

"Well?" and Fronsac made a gesture towards the battlement. "The cliff will settle all that."

But again I shook my head. He was worthy a better fate. Besides, to kill a wounded man——

"Let us take him with us down into the tower," I said at last. "They will not find him there, and we can still end it should there be need."

"As you will," assented Fronsac shortly, and we caught him by leg and shoulder and staggered towards the stair that led downward to the tower door. As we stumbled forward I tried in vain to pierce the gloom before us.

"Softly," I whispered. "There is a sentry at either end of the parapet."

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"Not to-night," said Mademoiselle quickly. "I heard M. le Duc dismiss them just before he came to me."

I breathed more freely. Certainly Roquefort would not wish to be overheard, yet still this was an unexpected bit of fortune.

Down the stair we tugged him and through the little door, which I locked carefully behind us. We propped our burden in one corner with his back against the wall. He was breathing deeply, with a hoarse, guttural sound, which I felt certain was the death-rattle. There was nothing we could do for him, and we went on down the tower stair, bearing the torch with us. At the foot another narrower flight plunged downward into the living rock of the cliff. I hastened down it, the others following without question. Down and down it went—at what a cost of labor must it have been constructed! At last I was stopped by a little door set in the rock. A coil of rope lay before it.

Fronsac gazed a moment at rope and door, then up into my eyes.

"I begin to understand," he said. "But can we open that door, my friend?"

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"We must," I answered. "There is no other way."

But I confess my heart fell as I examined it more closely, for it seemed as strong as the cliff itself. A dozen bolts, seemingly, buried in the very heart of the oak, held it to the rock. I could catch a glimpse of them as I pressed my torch to the crevice between wood and stone, and I could see how heavy they were. But to move them—to throw them back. I tried all the keys on Drouet's ring; not one of them would serve. I battered at the door with the musket, but could not even shake it. The sweat broke out across my forehead at the thought that this might be the end. I looked up and saw Fronsac watching me with a face from which he tried in vain to banish his concern.

"We have still at least four hours," I said, with what cheerfulness I could muster, and turned back again to the door.

Could I but cut the wood away I might yet throw back the bolts with the end of my poniard. I hacked at it fiercely. It seemed hard as iron and I could tear away but a splinter at a time. At the end of half an hour I had made little progress.

I paused a moment to take breath.

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"The watches are not changed till midnight," I said, seeing Fronsac's despairing face and that of Mademoiselle. "We have near four hours yet, my friend."

But as I turned again to the task, a sudden clatter reached us from the hall above as of some one pounding on the tower door. I understood in an instant, and was up the stair in three bounds.

"This way, men!" shouted a hoarse voice. "This way! Rescue!"

I sprang blindly forward, groped an instant in the darkness, and dragged Roquefort back from the door, cursing my folly at leaving him unbound.

For from the court came an answering shout, a rush of feet, and the wood groaned under a great blow.

CHAPTER XIV

THE DOOR IN THE CLIFF

"BACK! Back!" I cried to Fronsac, who appeared at the stair-head, bearing the torch, and I followed down close at his heels, dragging Roquefort after me, cursing and striking at me madly with his fists, but too weakened by his wound to do any great damage. In two strides we were at the bottom.

"Your scarf!" I called to Fronsac, and snatched it from him. "Now help me here," and we twisted Roquefort's arms behind him like a baby's and lashed them tight together. Then I set him down on the lowest step,—a horrible sight, the blood caked in his hair and about his face, drivelling, cursing, half-conscious. I could guess what an effort it had cost him to drag himself down the stair and give the alarm, and I found myself beginning to admire him.

I turned again to the door in an agony of despair. To be caught here like rats in a trap, with success so near! But to penetrate this door! I saw Fron-

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sac draw Mademoiselle to him and hold her close against his breast. They had abandoned hope, then! I looked at Roquefort with fiery eyes, hating him suddenly with a white hate.

"At least," I said between my teeth, "you will be dead long ere they reach us here. That shall be your reward for calling them. I swear that, assassin!"

He seemed to understand, and glared at me fiercely.

"This way! Rescue!" he shouted hoarsely. His voice was drowned in this cavern where we were, but as if in answer there came another great crash upon the tower door above us.

It seemed for a moment that Roquefort's scoundrels must be tumbling down the stair upon us. But the door held, and as I remembered how strongly it was built, I knew it would be no little task to break it through. The crash was repeated as we stood there listening—then a third time. I fancied I could hear the door splitting under this determined onslaught. Fronsac and Mademoiselle had forgotten all the world except each other. He strained her to him and stood looking down into her eyes, drinking in all the love they revealed to

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him unquestioningly in this last, desperate moment, whose terror banished coquetry. Had I Claire so, I too might have been content to die. Again came the crash upon the door, and again my eyes sought Roquefort's face.

And then in an instant I remembered! What a fool I had been not to think of it before! Pray Heaven it was not already too late! The keys!

I sprang upon him, merciless as a wolf, and with savage hands tore his doublet from his breast. He seemed to understand what I was after, and spat at me like some mad thing and tried to throw me off, then sank back exhausted, his lips white with froth.

In a moment my fingers had found a chain about his neck. I dragged it forth, and at the end were two keys. So the fox had kept always by him a secret means of escape from his den should the other fail him! I lifted the chain from his neck and the keys were mine. For a breath my hands were trembling so I could scarce hold them, but I gripped my manhood back to me and turned to the door. Were they the keys? They must be! I fitted them to the holes—they slipped in easily—the bolts flew back—the door opened.

A stream of fresh air rushed in upon us, and I

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could see again the sweet stars in the deep heaven. The cliff dropped sheer away beneath us. I could see no semblance of foothold, no trace of the steps I had thought were there; yet the descent must be made. I knotted one end of the line tight to the heaviest bolt, then turned to the two who were still lost in each other.

"Come, Mademoiselle," I said gently, "you must go first."

"Go!" cried Fronsac, waking as from a dream. "Go whither, Marsan?"

I pointed to the open door—the rope.

"And you have opened it?" he asked, amazed. "What witchcraft!"

"We must hasten," I said. "They are preparing some surprise for us over our heads yonder. Come. We will knot one end of this rope so that Mademoiselle can place her feet in it. Then, standing erect and steadying herself by holding to the rope, we will lower her quite safely to the ground."

I had made the loop even as I was speaking, and threw it a little over the cliff edge.

"Come, Mademoiselle," I said again.

But she drew back with a shuddering cry as she saw the abyss that yawned before her.

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"Oh, no!" she cried. "Not that! That is too fearful! I can never do that!"

It was not a time for soft words. Our lives could not be sacrificed to a woman's nerves, and I steeled my heart.

"Mademoiselle," I said, "you are holding all our lives in your hand. In a moment a crowd of ruffians will be through that door up yonder—then it will be too late! No daughter of the Comte de Cadillac could be a coward!"

"Marsan!" cried Fronsac, "you go too far!"

But the girl took her hands from before her face and stopped him with a gesture.

"No," she said quite calmly, "M. de Marsan is right! I thank him for his frankness. No daughter of the Comte de Cadillac could be a coward! I am ready, Monsieur!"

My heart warmed with admiration of her as she advanced quite steadily to the cliff's edge, sat down without shrinking, and adjusted her feet within the loop.

"That is good," I said. "There is no danger whatever, Mademoiselle, so long as you hold the rope firmly and keep your face to the rock. Come, my friend."

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I could see her shudder as we swung her out over the abyss, and I admit that my own nerves were not wholly steady, but she held tightly to the rope and in an instant was out of sight. Down and down we lowered her slowly and carefully, I keeping an eye on Roquefort, meanwhile, to see that he essayed no mischief. But he sat quite still on the step where I had placed him, seemingly only half-conscious, and watched us with bloodshot eyes. Yet I was certain that some catastrophe was hanging over us. There had been an ominous silence for some moments at the tower door, but I knew that his men would not abandon him so tamely. What trick they were preparing I could not even guess, but at last the weight lifted from the rope, and we knew that Mademoiselle, at least, was safely down.

"What next, my friend?" asked Fronsac.
"What of him?" and he glanced at Roquefort.
"Has he not lived long enough?"

I looked at him as he sat drivelling there. Yet I had thought never to kill a man but in a fair fight. And on the instant a sudden inspiration flashed into my brain.

"I have it!" I cried. "We will lower him down the cliff! We will take him prisoner to M. le Comte

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to deal with as he chooses! There would be a vengeance for you!"

I could see the dare-devil in Fronsac take fire at the words. In a moment he had pulled up the rope, and we were knotting it under Roquefort's arms. He resisted vaguely, weakly, like a drunken man, but we dragged him to the edge and pushed him over. He cried out hoarsely as he fell, and I thought for a breath that his weight would drag us over with him, but the rope caught in a crevice of the rock and gave us time to brace ourselves. Then we lowered him rapidly, rasping and scraping against the cliff, but there was no time to think of that. At last the rope hung taut.

"You next, my friend," I said to Fronsac on the instant. He would have protested, but I pushed him to the edge. "Hasten. Think who awaits you below."

Without a word he let himself carefully over the edge. I could see the rope quivering under the double weight, and noted with anxious eyes how it chafed against the edge of the rock. The moments passed, and at last I saw that he too was down.

I stooped to test the rope where the rock had

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chafed it, when there came a sudden hideous roar from overhead, a crash of splitting timbers—they had fired a petard against the door—had blown it down—I understood now the reason of their silence!

There was no time to hesitate. I caught the rope and threw myself over the cliff. My knees scraped against the rock, the rope burned deep into my fingers, still smarting from the dagger-cut. But I held fast, praying that they might not see the rope for yet a moment—yet a moment—yet a moment!

Some one tugged at it from above, then it suddenly gave way. I felt myself falling—I grasped at the cliff—I seemed to choke—and the world turned black about me.

CHAPTER XV

ROQUEFORT EXACTS A PROMISE

I OPENED my eyes to find Fronsac bending over me. He had torn the clothing from my breast and had one hand above my heart.

"It still beats!" he said. "Thank God, it still beats! We must get him to your father's surgeon, Valérie."

To the surgeon! I had been hurt, then? And in an instant I remembered—the rope had been cut—I had fallen. Was I dying? The thought sent a shock through me.

"Come, Fronsac," I said. "What is it? How badly am I hurt?"

He replied with a cry of joy.

"Splendid! I feared that you were dead, my friend! Now let us see what bones are broken. Can you move yourself?"

For answer I sat upright, then got unsteadily to my feet. They looked at me as at one risen from the dead.

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"But where is Roquefort?" I asked suddenly.
"He has not escaped?"

Fronsac pointed to a dark mass which lay just at the cliff-foot.

"He is there," he said. "He is far past escape. He was still bound to the rope when it broke. You fell upon him, which may explain your good fortune. But we thought you dead!"

"The rope did not break," I said, "it was cut. They blew down the door with a charge of powder."

"But you are quite sure you have no bones broken?" asked Fronsac anxiously.

I stretched my arms and felt myself all over.

"Quite sure," I said at last. "Nothing worse than a few bruises. But let us look at him."

We brought him out from the shadow of the cliff, unbound his hands, and laid him on his back. Blood was oozing from nose and mouth, but his heart still fluttered faintly.

"We must get him to M. le Comte," I said, "before he dies. Come," and I caught him by the shoulders.

Fronsac took him by the legs, and we set off through the night, Mademoiselle following. The

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moon was just clear of the horizon and the night was warm and still. We had reached the ground just outside the wall of Marleon, and we left the town to the right, proceeding straight towards the hill where I had seen the camp. At the end of ten minutes I caught the gleam of the camp-fires. But they seemed a long way off, and more than once we were compelled to lay our heavy burden down and take a moment's rest. At last a sentry stopped us.

"We must see M. le Comte at once," I said. "This is his daughter. You will see the need of haste."

He peered into our faces, his eyes large with astonishment.

"I will take you to him, Monsieur," he said, and set off through the camp.

We had not far to go. At the end of a moment I saw M. le Comte's standard floating above a tent before which blazed a great torch. At the tent door a man was sitting, his head on his hand, the image of despair. Mademoiselle saw him also, and, with a little cry, sprang to him and threw her arms about his neck. He looked up with a great start.

"Valérie, is it you?" he cried. "Here, safe in my arms. God! what a miracle!"

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He strained her to him as she lay sobbing on his breast. Then he looked up and saw us standing there.

"Fronsac!" he cried. "Marsan! Why, this is a deliverance! And who have you there?" he added, looking at our burden.

"This is M. le Duc de Roquefort," answered Fronsac.

"Roquefort!" and M. le Comte was on his feet, the picture of bewilderment. He put his daughter gently from him, came to us, and bent over the unconscious man. "He is wounded?" he asked. "Bring him hither, then," and he held back the curtain of the tent. "Lay him there," he said, and we placed our burden on the couch.

M. le Comte looked at us again—at his daughter—at Fronsac—at me—at Roquefort, lying there with bloody lips.

"It is a dream," he said. "It is not to be believed—that two men should break their way out of that castle yonder and bring Roquefort with them. It is a dream!"

But Mademoiselle had her arms again about his neck.

"Is that a dream?" she cried, and kissed him full

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upon the lips. Then she fell back with a little, frightened cry. "What is it?" she asked. "What has happened? Your face!"

He looked at her with terrible eyes, and then at me.

"A wound," he answered hoarsely. "But 'tis healing now."

Yes, it was healing. I could see the drawn, puckered, white edges. A bandage hid the rest—but I could guess what it was like—what it would be always like! And I had been the cause of it!

I think he read my thought, for he held out his hand to me.

"M. de Marsan," he said quite gently, "you have proved it was not you who were the traitor, but d'Aurilly. I have yet to deal with him."

"I have already dealt with him, M. le Comte," and I smiled into his eyes, with a great lightening of the heart that he had forgiven me.

"Dealt with him?"

"With these hands," I answered. "It was he who planned the whole affair. Roquefort had arranged for him to marry Mademoiselle. The wedding was to take place to-morrow."

I could see Fronsac's face turn purple.

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"The hound!" he said between his teeth. "The hound!"

"I knew that he was dead," said Mademoiselle. "Roquefort told me. But I did not know, Monsieur, that it was to you I was indebted for this deliverance. It is a great debt we owe you."

"It was nothing," I protested. "It was a joy to my heart to pull him down."

"Tell us," said M. le Comte simply.

So, as briefly as might be, I told them the story of what had happened in the torture-chamber.

At the end M. le Comte held out his hand to me again.

"You are a man, M. de Marsan," he said warmly. "I count myself fortunate to have found a liege so gallant. I shall remember it."

"But he has not told you all, M. le Comte!" cried Fronsac. "It was he who planned the escape—I was but a follower, a looker-on. I had despaired a dozen times, but he always found a way. It was magnificent!"

"No, no," I protested again, and stopped. M. le Comte was looking at me and laughing.

"M. de Marsan," he said, "I will spare your blushes. Only permit me to say that I shall not

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soon forget the man who hath returned me my daughter, whom I had despaired of rescuing—who hath delivered mine enemy into my hands.”

“But, indeed, M. le Comte,” I said earnestly, “it was not I conceived the plan. I could have done nothing of myself,” and I told him the story of the message. “This friend of yours in Roquefort’s household is no ordinary man,” I added.

“No, he is no ordinary man,” assented M. le Comte. “It is not often one secures an agent at once so fearless and so full of resource. ’Tis a strange story, but not mine to tell,” and he fell a moment silent. “Still,” he continued warmly, “you will at least permit me to give you credit with the execution. I have myself found many times that it is easy to lay a plan. But often I have not succeeded so well in carrying it out.”

He turned to where Roquefort lay on the couch. I fancied that I could already discern the death-damp on his brow.

“He must have attention,” said M. le Comte, and, raising the curtain, he despatched a sentry for his surgeon. The surgeon was soon there, and bent over Roquefort with grave face. He wiped the blood from his lips, raised his head, and examined

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with deft fingers the wound Fronsac's musket had inflicted, then, tearing away his clothing, put his ear against his chest. He listened a moment so, then stood erect again.

"'Tis as I feared, M. le Comte," he said. "The wound in the head is nothing—a glance blow that tore the scalp and produced a slight palsy; but his chest is crushed; he bleeds within. I have seen men so who have fallen beneath their horses, but I have never yet seen one get well again."

"And how long will he live?"

The surgeon shook his head.

"An hour—a day—perhaps two days. One cannot tell. Let us try to bring him back to consciousness."

He bathed face and temples with cold water and forced a glass of wine between his teeth. The dying man groaned—coughed feebly—opened his eyes and saw us.

For a moment he lay without moving, his eyes travelling from face to face. Then they rested on M. le Comte, and a bitter smile curved his lips.

"So—you have won!" he whispered.

"Yes—I have won!" but there was more of pity than triumph in M. le Comte's voice.

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Roquefort's eyes rested on him an instant in puzzled inquiry. He did not understand this change of tone. Then his eyes travelled to the surgeon's face.

"Am I done?" he asked. "Is this the end?"

The surgeon bent his head.

"Shall I summon a priest, M. le Duc?" he asked.

Roquefort's eyes grew bright with sudden resolution. "A priest? Yes! At once!"

But there was no fear of death in his face—he seemed elate, almost joyful. I could not understand it. His countenance had taken on a certain dignity it had before been stranger to—the lines of cruelty and harshness were wiped away—he was almost handsome, and his eyes were bright with purpose.

He coughed again, and a spatter of blood came to his lips. The surgeon wiped it away and gave him again of the wine to drink. We could see how it brought warm life back to him.

"M. le Comte," he said, when he could speak again, "I have a favor to ask of you. I am sure you can be a generous enemy—even to me, since I am dying."

"Ask on, M. le Duc," said the other, in a softened voice. "What is it?"

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"One of your men will take this ring," and he pulled a signet from his finger, "mount to the castle, and show it to the sentry at the outer gate. He will open without question. Your messenger will ask for Mlle. Claire de Brissac. He will tell her that I lie dying here and wish to see her. She will come, I know. Will you do so much for me, M. le Comte?"

"Aye, and more," came the answer readily, and M. le Comte stooped and took the ring. "It shall be done. I give my word for it."

Roquefort's eyes blazed up with joy; then he lay back wearily upon his pillow. I felt a sudden fear spring to life in my heart. What could he want of Claire? I looked up to find M. le Comte's eyes upon me.

"M. de Marsan," he said, "are you too weary to perform this journey?"

Weary? No! Not when the journey led to Claire! When I should be alone with her, as I had dreamed, with only the stars for company and none to interfere!

"I shall be glad to go, M. le Comte," I said, and took the ring.

"There is need of haste," he added, glancing at

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the figure on the bed. "Do you wish a companion?"

"A companion? No, Monsieur. They might fire if they saw two men approaching. One they will not fear."

"True," he assented. "Hasten, then; we will await you here."

I hurried out into the night, across the camp, and around the cliff to the road that mounted to the castle gate. The moon was higher now, and I could see the road stretching, a white ribbon, ahead of me. I knew that others, looking down, could see me mounting, and as I went I held my hands high above my head to prove my peaceful errand. So I was permitted to pass without challenge until I stood before the great gate.

"A message from M. le Duc de Roquefort!" I cried.

There was a moment's pause, then I heard the rattle of bolts and a little postern opened.

"Enter!" said a gruff voice.

I stooped and stepped through. The gate was clanged shut behind me in an instant. A mob of men-at-arms crowded threateningly about me.

"M. le Duc is now in the camp of M. le Comte

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de Cadillac," I began. "He sent this ring by me to prove that I am his messenger. He desires me to bring back to him the person of Mademoiselle Claire de Brissac."

There was a little stir in their ranks.

"What doth it mean?" asked one at last.

"What wants he of the girl?"

"I do not know," I answered, and I could not wholly keep the bitterness from my voice. "He sent this ring that you might do his bidding without question."

They nodded one to another, each placing his construction on the order. Doubtless they were all familiar with their master's passion for her, and so could fashion their own conclusion. Some half dozen of them drew to a corner and talked together a moment in low tones. At last they came back to me.

"You shall have the girl, Monsieur," said one, "but you must leave us the ring for warrant."

I handed it over readily enough, and watched him as he hastened across the court and plunged into the dark doorway of the building beyond. The minutes dragged like hours. Would she come? What would she think?

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A touch on the arm brought me out of my thoughts. I turned to find myself looking into the face of Roquefort's surgeon—the one who had gazed down upon me on the rack. Again some fancied familiarity in his features struck me, and his voice, when he spoke, made me fairly start, so certain was I that I had heard it somewhere far from Marleon.

"A word with you, M. de Marsan," he said, and drew me deeper into the shadow of the wall. "M. le Duc is injured, is he not?"

I glanced around to see that none could hear.

"These others must not know," I began, "not yet."

"They shall not know."

There was something in his tone that drew my eyes to his face. I saw that it was set as with great suffering. Could it be that he so loved his master?

"M. le Duc is injured," I said, "very badly,—so badly, I fear, he will not live."

"But he still lives?" he demanded eagerly.

"Oh, yes, and will for a day—perhaps two days."

He breathed a great sigh of relief.

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"Thank you, M. de Marsan," he said. "I think my place is with him. I shall soon follow you."

He left me abruptly, and I stared after him until the darkness hid him. There was some mystery in his manner I could not penetrate. But I did not ponder it long, for two figures emerged from the doorway opposite and I saw that one was Claire.

She came straight to me.

"What is it, M. de Marsan?" she asked. "What has happened?"

"M. le Duc is injured," I said, so low that the others could not hear. "He is very badly injured—dying, perhaps—and wishes to see you."

"Dying!" she breathed, her face white with horror. "And he was so strong—so full of life! Oh, then I will go! Let us hasten, Monsieur!"

They threw back the postern and in a moment we were without—alone together.

CHAPTER XVI

MADAME LA DUCHESSE DE ROQUEFORT

WE went down the road together in silence. For a moment my heart revolted at the warmth of Claire's allusion to the man; then I remembered that he was dying, and put the pettiness from me. I longed to speak to her, to take her hand, but I knew that fifty pairs of eyes were watching us from the battlements, and held my peace. But I could look at her—at her great, dark eyes, her red lips, the curls clustering about her neck, her lithe, active, perfect figure, promising even greater charms as the years passed.

She raised her eyes to mine and smiled tremulously at what she saw there.

"How far is this place to which we go, Monsieur?" she asked.

"Not far," I answered. "Would it were all eternity away!"

She smiled again.

"And you would wish to become a second

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Ahasuerus?" she asked, looking at me archly. "To keep walking thus, on and on, for all eternity? Surely not?"

"With you!" I cried, all my love in my face.
"With you!"

She turned her eyes away. But as we passed a ledge of rock, where the shadow lay deep upon the road, she stumbled.

I know not how it was—I had thought only to catch her hand—but the touch of her set my blood aflame—she was in my arms, close against my breast. For an instant she looked up at me, startled; then, with a sigh, she yielded to me and laid her head upon my heart. And I was far past words—far past anything but the deep, tremulous joy of holding her, of gazing down into her eyes. She gave me to drink deep of them.

"How your heart beats!" she said at last, smiling up at me. "It is just here, under my ear."

"For you, dear life! Every beat of it!"

"And mine for you," she said. "Every beat of it!"

I looked up at the bright heavens—away at the distant hills.

"What is it?" she asked.

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"That it should be true!" I said. "I have dreamed of it—longed for it—but that it should be true!"

"It has been true a long time," she answered softly,—“a long time, dearest Paul.”

Her voice lingered on the name. It was the first that I had heard it from her lips.

"But not so long as I," I protested. "I have loved you from the moment I saw you in the Rue Gogard. And you?"

She was smiling up at me with infinite tenderness.

"I have thought of no other man since then," she said.

Again I looked out over the plain. This time the gleam of the camp-fires caught my eyes, and with a start I remembered my errand.

"Sweetheart," I said, summoning all my courage, "we must go down. M. le Comte awaits us. I pledged him I would hasten. M. le Roquefort may even now be dead. He loves you, I think, but not as I!"

"No, not as you!"

She was looking up into my eyes, radiant with love and happiness. Never was there other woman like her!

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Yet we lingered for a time, as our parents must have lingered at the gate of Eden. But at last we reached the plain, and made our way to the camp and to the tent of M. le Comte.

They were awaiting us. Roquefort seemed much stronger. He was supported on a pile of pillows, and but for the fever-glare in his eyes would not have appeared ill. The eyes brightened as we entered and a vivid flush sprang to either cheek.

"Come hither, Claire!" he cried, and she went to him, glorious in her loveliness. Even he seemed startled by it, and gazed at her a moment without speaking.

"I have come to the end of the path, Claire," he said at last. "They tell me I may live a day, perhaps—no longer. And before the end I am going to ask you to keep a pledge you made me. See, I have kept mine"—and he made a little gesture towards me—"so far as with me lay."

Not till then did I understand, and my heart grew cold at thought of it.

"You know I have loved you, Claire," he went on, looking up into her eyes. "Nay, do not speak—do not protest! I have loved you! Had I not—had I not hungered for your love in return—I should have made you mine long ere this. But

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now, at the end, you must be mine! You have already promised, Claire! You cannot break your promise to a dying man!"

He paused—a cough choked him—and again there was blood upon his lips. I trembled to hurl myself upon him—to drag her away—but what could I say?—what plea could I offer? Oh, why did not she herself answer him?

But she did not answer—she did not draw away, as I, who stood there with starting eyes, watching her every movement, thought she must. She only knelt with her face buried in the cushions, shaken by sobs. But pity could go too far!

"You cannot deny a dying man, Claire," he repeated in a fainter voice, and I saw how little his strength was. "It means more to me than you can guess. I am dying without issue—without heir. I want Roquefort to be yours, Claire—every stone of the castle, every rood of the land. It must not go to that scoundrel in Valladolid."

I remembered Fronsac's story of his hate for his next of kin, and ceased to wonder at him. But she—she—why did not she put him from her? I know the price would tempt most women, yet I had not thought it would tempt her. But a moment since she had told me—there!—why recall it? For

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now she stood suddenly upright and looked down into his eyes quite calmly.

"If you really wish it, M. le Duc," she said. "If you think it will make you happier, I am ready!"

He lifted her hand to his lips—he forgot that he was looking in the face of death. Oh, I could have slain him—could have slain them both! What a fool was I to trust a woman's word! And what a fool would I yet be should I betray myself!

But I had need for all my self-control. They brought in the priest, and Roquefort, in two words, gained his consent. They hastened after stole and surplice; Claire knelt at the bedside, her hand in his—a great silence fell upon the tent. And then the voice of the priest began the service, shortened somewhat to fit this strange occasion. My heart stood still as he came to the responses—I hoped madly that Claire might yet refuse, but her voice was the stronger of the two.

They pressed forward to kiss the hand of Madame la Duchesse de Roquefort,—mistress of a demesne second only to that of M. le Comte himself,—but I did not stay to witness it. Sick at heart—cursing woman's baseness—I went blindly forth into the night.

CHAPTER XVII

A TEN YEARS' VENGEANCE

I OPENED my eyes to find Fronsac looking down at me. For an instant I thought myself still at the cliff-foot, but a glance told me I was in bed, in a room that, till then, I had never seen.

"You know me!" he cried. "You know me! Tell me, Marsan, you know me!"

"Of course I know you, Fronsac," I answered petulantly, and stopped, astonished at the effort the words cost me. "I have been ill!" I cried.

"Very ill," he said, "but you are past danger now, thank God! There, think no more about it—you must sleep."

He had no need to command me, for my brain seemed so numb it could not think. I remember perhaps a dozen such intervals of dim consciousness. Always there was Fronsac bending over me, and sometimes I fancied there was another in the room, who whisked away at the first sign of my awakening.

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A third face too there was. At first I did not know it, but stared stupidly up at it—and then, at last, I recognized Briquet, the surgeon of M. le Duc. For a moment my blood ran cold to see him standing so, for I thought myself again upon the rack. But a second glance dispelled my terror. His face had changed. Stern it still was, but no longer lined by hate, and the eyes were almost gentle. How different from the coals of fire that had glared at Roquefort! I was too weary to seek the clue to the change, which I marvelled at without in the least understanding.

But one morning it was different. I awoke strong, refreshed, my mind quite clear. It was like the dawn breaking over the hill-top, sweeping the valley clear of mist.

Fronsac brought me meat and drink, which I welcomed eagerly, for I was tortured with a great hunger. And as I ate I remembered it all again—the escape, the journey to the castle, the scene in the tent, with the priest's voice droning the service. Even yet I could not understand it—that a woman should break her word like that—and she had loved me—yes, I was quite sure that she had loved me. But of a sudden there had been dangled before

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her face the coronet of a duchesse—the wide lands and lofty castle of Roquefort—and she had seized the bait. Yet it had been offered her before and she had shrunk away. From month to month she had refused it, only to grasp it at this last desperate moment. I could not understand. Perhaps she had been merely playing with him; perhaps it was the sight of him lying helpless there that had moved her.

In any event, there was but one course for me. I must put her out of my heart. She was now on the mountain-top, I in the valley; she was Madame la Duchesse de Roquefort, I but Paul de Marsan, with no fortune but what my sword might win me. At the end I turned to Fronsac.

“Now, my friend,” I said, pushing the food away, “you must tell me everything—everything that has happened since that night.”

“Are you strong enough?” he questioned, hesitating.

“Strong enough?” and I laughed, for the wine had put new life into me. “I shall be out of bed to-morrow. By the way, where am I?”

“You are in a room of the castle of Madame la Duchesse de Roquefort.”

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He saw the flush that leaped to my face and smiled.

"Does that surprise you? The morning after the wedding you were found roaming about the walls quite mad. The exertion of the night before had been too much for you, it seems, and your hands were in a horrible state. We, who were thinking only of ourselves, did not think of you. You should have heard Valérie! Well, Madame la Duchesse insisted that you be brought straight here, and here you have since remained."

"And you with me," I added gratefully. "It must have been a trying task. I can imagine your self-denial, my friend."

"Nonsense!" he interrupted hastily. "It were little to do for the man who saved my life—and more. Besides, it was not only I."

I looked at him with questioning eyes.

"Briquet," he said, "did more than I. He seems to have a great interest in you. He is a strange man."

I pondered over this for a time.

"I do not know," I said at last. "I fancy sometimes that we have met before, and yet I cannot be certain."

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"But I have other news," and Fronsac looked at me, his face crimson with happiness. "About Valérie and myself."

I understood, and held out my hand to him.

"Yes," he said, "M. le Comte has given his consent. We shall be married so soon as I can take you with me to Cadillac."

I pressed his hand with sincere warmth.

"Then, indeed, I must hasten to get well!" I cried. "To think that I should be keeping you apart!"

"You have not kept us apart," he protested. "It was you brought us together. Valérie warned me not to approach her until I could bring you with me. I swear I am almost jealous of you, Marsan! The troop has heard the story of the escape—you will see how they will welcome you! M. le Comte himself remained until he was certain you were out of danger. You have quite won his heart, my friend!"

I felt my lips trembling.

"And after that scar!" I murmured.

"Yes, after the scar! Think, I have even seen him kissing the hand that inflicted it—for he has taken Madame la Duchesse to his heart also. Well, I am glad, for she has need of a protector."

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He read in my eyes the question which I dared not ask.

"Roquefort died an hour after the wedding," he said. "Do you know, Marsan, I fancy we never did him justice. He had his merits. He proved a man at the last!"

Yes, he proved a man at the last! It is a man's part to win—and he had won!

"He died alone," continued Fronsac, "alone, but for his surgeon. Briquet came to the tent almost before the wedding was concluded, and insisted on remaining at his master's side. Madame la Duchesse thought her place, also, was there. Roquefort had dropped asleep, worn out by the excitement of the evening, and it seemed certain that he would sleep till morning. A couch was brought for her, and she lay down, leaving Briquet to watch the sleeper. Scarcely had she closed her eyes, when a loud cry startled her awake. Roquefort was sitting upright in the bed, the blood pouring from his mouth, staring in terror at Briquet, who was calmly wiping it away. Death caught him with that look still on his face—it was not good to see. There were some whispers that Briquet had interfered, but M. le Comte shut them off. He seemed to understand.

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"So I fancy there is an end to the feud between Cadillac and Roquefort," he added, smiling. "The cousin from Valladolid has been sent about his business, swearing great oaths. Madame la Duchesse has already set about readjusting the rentals and rebuilding her peasants' huts. They idolize her! There is a woman! What a duchesse she makes!"

I could picture her to myself—she were worthy to mate with a prince, a king—to give a nation its rulers!

"You are weary," he said, seeing that I did not reply. "I have been running on without a thought of your condition! What a nurse I am! There, you must sleep," and without heeding my protests he gathered up the dishes and left the room, closing the door behind him.

But I could not sleep. My brain was full of what he had told me. I saw Madame la Duchesse de Roquefort moving like a queen among her vassals. There existed no longer Claire, the sweet, simple, ingenuous girl I had known, new to the world, fresh from the convent—there was now only the great lady. M. le Comte himself, great as he was, had been proud to bend his head and kiss her hand.

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Who was great enough, strong enough, bold enough, to aspire to her lips? Well, I would still love the girl—I would hold her locked in my heart—the great lady might go her way. And I thought of her as she had been on that last night of all—I felt again her warm, sweet body in my arms—I gazed again into her eyes and saw love there—I heard again her voice—“And mine for you! Every beat of it!” God! And a moment later she had fallen!

It was long before I slept, but tired nature asserted herself at last, and it was not until another morning dawned that she lifted her weights from off my eyes. This time it was Briquet I found at my bedside, and I noted again how his face had softened and grown human. He smiled as he saw my eyes on his.

“You are better,” he said. “It is easy to see that. You will soon be quite well.”

Again the voice—where had I heard it? I must penetrate this mystery.

“M. Briquet,” I began, “my friend has told me how deeply I am indebted to your care, and I wish to thank you. But have we not met before?”

“I should not think you would forget it,” he

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answered readily. "I was called to attend d'Aurilly—and you."

"Yes—I know," I said impatiently. "But before that?"

He hesitated a moment, then drew from his pocket a small book, tore out a strip of paper, and wrote upon it a rapid sentence.

"I am quite willing that you should know," he said. "In fact, I believed that you already knew," and he held the paper before my eyes.

"Monsieur," I read, "I have learned of your demeanor at the question, and am grateful, for I am he who brought the warning to Marsan."

There could be no mistaking the handwriting, and I looked at him amazed.

"It was you, then," I stammered,—“you.”

"Yes, I. Looking up at me from the rack, I thought you knew me."

"No," I said, still looking at him wonderingly. "I could not place you. I did not suspect——"

"That I could be a spy, a traitor?" and he laughed, with some of the old look back upon his face. "Let me tell you the story, Monsieur; perhaps you will no longer wonder. My father lived at Lembeye, and managed to save some money.

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He determined that I should have a career, and so sent me to Paris to become a student of medicine. That was ten years ago, and I came back to my home to find it desecrated. M. le Duc de Roquefort had ridden through the town at the head of his ruffians. As he passed our gate, he saw my sister standing there, a pretty girl of seventeen, fresh as the dawn, with brown eyes that were always laughing. Without checking his horse, he leaned down and swung her to the saddle before him."

He paused and passed his hand before his eyes, as though to blot out a vision.

"It was done in an instant," he went on at last. "My father could do nothing. He could only stand and watch her carried away, screaming, struggling, with those other devils looking on and laughing. It was then that I came home. I had been away for four years. No one knew me. I buried my old self and started to find my sister. I found her here at Marleon, Monsieur; you can guess in what condition! The child killed her,—she was happy to die,—and I buried them together. There was nothing left but my vengeance. I thought at first to kill him—but that was so poor a

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way! I gained entrance to his household, first as a man-at-arms, then as his physician. I won his confidence, only to betray it; he told me his plans and had them come to naught. Cadillac at first refused to trust me, but I told him my story, and I have served him well,—how well you will never guess, Monsieur, nor in how many ways I tortured this monster—but for me, he would have had Mademoiselle de Brissac long ago. And at the end I told him—he died looking at me.”

He stopped. I could find nothing to say. I gazed at him, fascinated.

“Now it is over,” he said. “Now there will be room in my life for other things than hate. I shall go back to Paris. I have waited here only to see you out of danger, M. de Marsan. You are out of danger now,” and he held out his hand. “Adieu.”

I took his hand in mine and pressed it. I could find no blame for him in my heart.

“Adieu, Monsieur,” I said, “and again thanks for your kindness.”

“I mean to devote my life to it,” he said simply, “so much of my life as is left to me,” and he was gone almost before the words were spoken.

I lay for long looking at the door, pondering on

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his story. What a vengeance! To play traitor to a man for long years—to seem his friend and yet to hate him—and then, at the end, to lay the treachery bare before him! I understood now, as M. le Comte had done, that look of terror in Roquefort's eyes, and found it in my heart to pity him.

CHAPTER XVIII

LIGHT

THE day passed without further incident. I took a turn about the room on Fronsac's arm and found that my strength was fast returning. I ate the food that he brought me, and lay staring at the ceiling till drowsiness overtook me. Yet, despite myself, I was not content. More than once I caught myself listening for I know not what—a light step in the corridor, the rustle of a dress, the sound of a voice—expecting the door to open and show Claire there. What a fool I was! What time had she for me? She was busy with the affairs of her duchy—a great lady!

Night came at last, and darkness, bringing sleep with it. Dawn found me strong, refreshed. I arose and walked about the room, and though my legs still trembled somewhat, I was certain that, once on horseback, I should be quite myself. I was determined to leave Marleon as soon as night be—a horror of the place possessed me.

Fronsac found me dressed, and I lost no time in

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announcing my wish to set out with him for Cadillac.

"But you are not strong enough," he urged.

"Let us wait. There is no cause for haste."

"If Mademoiselle Valérie heard you say that!" I laughed. "I can see her awaiting you in that arbor by the river's edge."

"So it is for my sake!" he said.

"No, it is not for your sake, my friend," I answered earnestly. "At least, not wholly. I am itching to leave this place. There is no quiet for me here."

He looked at me for a moment questioningly, but I did not meet his eyes. My secret must remain my own.

"Very well," he said quietly at last, "since you wish it, we will set out to-day. I will inform Madame la Duchesse. You will doubtless wish to thank her for her kindness."

"Yes," I assented thickly. "Yes."

It would try my strength to set eyes on her again—to speak to her. But I was a man, thank God! I could hide my heart!

Yet when at last we stood before her, I forgot my injured pride in the joy of seeing her—the

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calm brow, the dark eyes, the arching mouth, the white hand, and the swell of the arm lost in the lace above. What a woman! No longer the girl fresh from the convent—the fine lady! A duchesse—a queen!

“And so you are leaving us, M. de Marsan?” she asked at last.

Her voice brought me back to myself—she on the hill-top, I in the valley.

“Yes, I am leaving, Madame,” I said. “I am quite well again, and my friend here is hungering for Cadillac and those that await him there.”

Her face changed, and she sat gazing at me in silence for a moment. There was that in her eyes—but there!—why be, a second time, a fool?

“You do not seem well,” she said. “Nor strong. Are you quite sure you can bear the journey?”

“Quite sure, Madame.”

She made a little gesture of impatience.

“I have to thank you, Madame,” I added, “for your kindness in receiving me here. It was very foolish of me to be ill.”

“Very foolish,” she agreed, looking at me again.

“Very foolish. I do not think you realize how

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foolish. I had thought you a man of wit, M. de Marsan, but I find you very dense!"

I flushed at the words, but dared not look at her. I must go, or I should be upon my knees before her, a beggar for her slightest favor. I glanced at Fronsac, who stood with folded arms, frowning deeply. .

"Adieu, then, Madame," I said.

She held out her hand to me. I knelt and kissed it, not daring to look up into her face; remembering, with a great rush of tenderness, the times I had already kissed it. I was aflame to snatch her to me, to assert my claim to her, to kiss her arms, her neck, her lips, to ask her if she had forgot that scene in the moonlight——

"M. de Fronsac," she was saying, "listen—I have a little story I wish you to hear. You, M. de Marsan, remain where you are. There was once a girl taken suddenly from a convent, where she had spent her whole life, and planted in the midst of a turbulent court. The ruler of the court looked on her with lustful eyes, yet had the honor to offer her his title. But she heard strange tales of him which frightened her, and at last she saw another, nearer her own age, who seemed to her the very

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rose of gallantry and courage. So she put away from her all thought of the other, and at last—one night—her lover claimed her. But the other lay dying. He was lord of wide lands and of a proud title. These, he said, he wanted her to have, even at this last moment, when their marriage must be one unconsummated. And as she knelt beside his bed, listening to him in patience, for she remembered he was dying, of a sudden the thought came to her—why not take these things for her lover? Oh, it would be a joy to give him place and power—more than her mere self! Why not give him these as well?”

She paused for a moment—her voice was trembling so. I could not look up—I dared not, lest my eyes be blinded.

“You will pardon me, M. de Fronsac, if I tell the story very badly,” she said, with a little, unsteady laugh. “But it moves me greatly, for her lover did not understand. He fancied she desired place and wealth for herself, when it was alone for him. He did not comprehend the greatness of her love. He was stricken with fever—and as, night after night, she listened to him in his delirium, she knew that it was her fault—that she had driven

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him mad—and her heart grew cold with fear that he might not get well. But he did get well—he came to her to say good-by—he closed his eyes to all she had intended, to all she let him see. He wrapped himself about with his pride, which he fancied had been injured, and would not look at her. What think you of such a man, M. de Fronsac?”

“I think him a fool!” said Fronsac savagely.

But I did not heed him. I was looking up, up into her eyes. And I read there the same story they had told me once before. There could be no mistaking!

“Claire!” I cried,—“Claire!”

And she, in her great love and strength, stooped and raised me to the seat beside her.

THE END

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A CHILD OF THE NIGHT

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CHAPTER I

AN ENCOUNTER IN THE STREETS

It was as I turned the corner into the Rue de l'Evêque that a woman ran straight into my arms. I could hear her gasping for breath, and a glance told me that she was young and pretty. She clutched nervously at my sleeve, and, not unwillingly, I put my arm about her to prevent her falling.

"What is it, Mademoiselle?" I questioned.

She seemed too agitated and exhausted to reply, but pointed down the street, where, through the gloom, I saw a man running towards us.

"He is following you?" I asked.

She nodded.

"And you wish to be relieved of him?"

Again she nodded.

"Very well, Mademoiselle," I said, "do you remain here, and I will say two words to this intruder."

I placed her in the shadow of the wall, and draw-

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ing my sword, advanced to meet her pursuer. I had not far to go, for he was almost upon us. He attempted to pass me, but stopped when he saw my point at his breast.

"Not so fast, Monsieur," I said. "It would be well to pause here for a moment. You are quite out of breath and further exertion might easily bring on an apoplexy."

He stared at me in amazement, his face purple, his eyes starting from his head. I saw by his attire that he was a bourgeois of the better class. He was very fat, which accounted for the fact that the girl had outstripped him, and was perhaps sixty years of age. I looked him in the eyes with a smile, and the thought came to me that those were not the eyes of an honest man.

"And who the devil are you?" he cried, when he had recovered his breath sufficiently to speak.

"My name is of no moment, Monsieur," I answered. "It is enough that I do not wish you to pass, but to return by the way you came."

He stared at me for a moment, his amazement visibly increasing. I merely smiled the more, for the situation amused me greatly.

"If this is a jest," he said, at last, holding in his

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anger, " it is a sorry one and one that will cost you dear."

" It is no jest," I declared. " On the contrary, I was never more in earnest. The way is barred for the present. Return, I beg of you, or I shall be obliged to enforce my request, though I am far from wishing to harm you," and I made a significant gesture with my sword.

" So you are the lover!" he sneered. " I suspected there was a lover," and he looked me up and down. " I shall not forget your appearance, Monsieur, though I do not know your name. I warn you again that you are playing a dangerous game."

" Dangerous or not," I retorted, losing patience, " I play it to suit myself. Be off!"

" She is my niece," he protested. " I am her legal guardian. You are setting the law at defiance."

" Be off!" I cried again, for I feared every moment that a section of the watch would chance into the street. He doubtless had the same thought, for he looked about him with expectant eyes, but saw the street deserted. He glanced at me again, and I prodded him gently with my sword. He started

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as he felt the point and walked slowly away, muttering horrible curses and shaking his fists in the air in an ecstasy of rage. I had never before seen a man so wholly lose grip of his temper, and more than half expected him to fall in a fit.

But he did not fall, only staggered from side to side of the street like a drunken man. I watched him until he faded from sight in the gathering darkness, and then turned back to the fugitive.

She had apparently recovered from her exhaustion, for she arose as I approached and looked at me shyly. She was prettier than I had thought.

"Well, Mademoiselle," I said, "it seems I have rid you of your pursuer. Now whither shall I conduct you? Believe me, I am wholly at your service."

She glanced up into my face and went red, then white, then red again, and lowered her eyes in helpless confusion. Standing so, I could see her long, sooty lashes outlined against her cheek, the droop of the lids, the little nose, the shell-like ear—'twas enough to make any man play the fool. I confess, I had done it for much less.

"I do not know, Monsieur," she stammered, at last, "where you can take me."

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"What?" I cried, astonished in my turn. "But your home, Mademoiselle; your family?"

"It is from my home that I flee," she answered, sadly, a little break in her voice. "It is my family whom I fear."

"But your friends?" I persisted, my heart warming towards her. "At least you have friends."

She shook her head, and I fancied I could see the tears shining beneath the lashes.

"None who would not conceive it their duty to deliver me to my family," she said, and stood knitting her fingers together nervously.

I paused a moment in sheer bewilderment. Here was a problem!

"Perhaps it is my duty also to deliver you to your family," I remarked at last, but my heart was not in the words.

"Ah, you would not say so, Monsieur, if you knew the story!" and she looked up at me beseechingly, her eyes bright with tears. There was no mistaking this time, and I, certainly, could not resist their appeal, which sent the blood bounding in my temples.

"Come," I said, "we must get away from here, at any rate, or your amiable uncle will return with

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reënforcements and surprise us. Take my arm, Mademoiselle."

She did so without hesitation, and I led her across the Rue St. Honoré and into the gardens of the Tuileries. The place was thronged with people, as it always is in the evening, summer or winter, and, deciding that no one could discover us among so many, I found an unoccupied seat under the trees near the river, where I installed her. .

On the way, I had reflected on the situation in which I found myself, and its complete absurdity struck me for the first time. Here was I, a young man alone in Paris, knowing no one, with no fortune but youth's hope for the future, assuming the protection of a pretty girl of sixteen or seventeen, whom I had never seen until ten minutes since and whose name I did not even know.

I could not help laughing as I seated myself beside her. She looked at me for a moment with a glance clear and unembarrassed, but in which there was nothing bold nor immodest, and then, comprehending my thought, she threw back her head and laughed with me. I was enchanted, and in my admiration forgot my mirth. I saw that her throat was full, round, and white, that her chin

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was adorable, that there were dimples in her cheeks, that her mouth was finely arched, and her teeth small and regular. I felt a sudden warmth about my heart. Plainly here was a girl innocent as well as beautiful, and who looked at the world with eyes in which there was no trace of jaundice or suspicion. Harm such a one? Not I!

"Come, Mademoiselle," I said at last, "it is necessary for us to arrive at an understanding of the situation. You behold in me Pierre le Moyne, late of Mont-de-Marsan, but for a week past and I trust for the future, of Paris, and, I repeat, wholly at your service," and as I said the word I arose and bowed before her.

She acknowledged my bow with a pretty little nod of the head.

"And I, M. le Moyne," she answered, "am Mademoiselle Anne Ribaut; although I much prefer to be called Nanette, and, I fear, very greatly in need of your services."

"Tell me the story," I suggested, and reseated myself beside her.

"Well, M. le Moyne," she began, "it is like this. My father and mother are both dead—have been

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dead for so long that I remember neither of them—and my father's brother, Jacques Ribaut, a jeweller of the Rue des Moulins, is my guardian. Until a week ago he kept me at the convent of the Sacred Heart, and then, finally, just as I began to think I was to spend my whole life there, he sent for me. Oh, how pleased I was when the time came to leave those fearful gray walls, within which one never dared speak above a whisper! But I did not imagine what was about to befall me, or I should not have been so happy. I arrived at the Rue des Moulins; I was shown into the presence of my uncle, and I tried to make him love me. He looked me over much as he would have inspected an ox he was about to purchase, and he seemed well satisfied."

"I do not doubt it," I said, and I looked at her sparkling eyes and laughing mouth, and thought that a man must indeed be hard to please who would not be satisfied.

"Do not interrupt, I beg of you, Monsieur," she cried, "or I shall lose my place, as we used to say at the convent. Well, as I said, he appeared pleased, and I had begun to hope that we should be

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very happy together, and that he would be good to me and permit me to see something of the world. But the next day he brought in another man to see me—oh, a horrible man, with a great nose which seemed to spread all over his face, and green eyes that would make you tremble. He also looked me over in a way that made my flesh tingle—that filled me with shame and anger, as though I had been insulted—and then they both went away and I tried to forget all about it. But the next day my uncle came to see me again and informed me that I was to marry this man, whose name, it seems, is Jean Briquet. I protested that I did not wish to marry, and especially not such a monster. I said that I had, as yet, seen nothing of the world, except that gray and dreary bit enclosed within the four walls of the convent—that I was still young and that there was plenty of time. But my uncle was inexorable. He said it was already a thing accomplished, since he had promised M. Briquet my hand, and that the wedding should take place in a week's time."

She paused for a moment, overcome by the horror of the recollection, and I found that in some manner her hand had made its way to mine. She

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did not attempt to remove it, and I held it closely, with a strange tenderness in my heart. It was so warm, so soft, so confiding—a child's hand.

"Yes, yes," I said, fearing that if she paused she would see her hand a captive, "and then?"

"I heard no more about it until to-night, when my uncle came to me and told me that the wedding was to take place at nine o'clock to-morrow morning. He paid no heed to my entreaties and reproaches, but warned me not to fail to be ready at the hour, and turned on his heel and left me. I could think of only one thing to do—that was to flee. Anything seemed preferable to marrying that hideous creature. So I put on my hat, placed in my purse the little money I possess, stole down the stairs, and through the front door into the street. Unfortunately, my uncle caught a glimpse of me as I ran past the house, and started in pursuit. You know the rest, Monsieur. You do not blame me?" and she looked at me with eyes soft with entreaty.

"No," I said, "I do not blame you. You were right to flee, since there was no other way. No one could expect you to marry a monster."

"Ah, how glad I am to hear you say that!" she cried. "And you will protect me, Monsieur, will

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you not? How I admired the manner in which you disposed of my uncle this evening," and she smiled at me in a way there was no resisting.

Evidently even within the walls of a convent a woman may learn many things—or perhaps no woman needs to be taught the surest way to reach a man's heart.

CHAPTER II

I FIND MYSELF BROTHER TO AN ENCHANTING GIRL

WE sat for some time in silence, she looking with childish delight at the brilliant and ever-changing scene before her, I pondering over the perplexities of the situation. I saw that I should need all my wit to straighten out the snarl, and though I was proud of my wit, as every Gascon must be, I doubted somewhat if it would prove equal to this task. But this misgiving did not vex me long,—we of the south take trouble as it comes. Besides, was I not here, in one of the loveliest spots of the most beautiful city in the world, with an enchanting girl at my side, who permitted me to hold her hand and gaze into her eyes? Mordieu! in such a situation, how could a man, with warm, red blood in him, doubt his power for bringing things to pass?

Indeed, the scene itself was one to make a man forget his troubles, as I saw it had made my com-

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panion forget hers, and I had not looked upon it so often that I could contemplate it with indifferent eyes. The moon was just rising behind the long line of the Tuileries and showed us in the walks and about the fountains the crowds which had gathered to get a breath of air and exchange a word of gossip. A row of lanterns had been swung from end to end of the Allée des Orangers—by order, perhaps, of some wealthy bourgeois, who wished to hold a fête there—and two or three men, in a uniform I did not know, were busy keeping loiterers away. It was public ground, of course, but then money will work miracles, especially in Paris. Away to our right gleamed the quays and the river; the former even more crowded than the gardens, the latter sparkling with the lanterns of grain-barges and fishing-boats, drifting with the current, or slowly making head against it. And everywhere was the murmur of voices, like the wind stirring the leaves of a great forest.

I saw how the girl's eyes sparkled and her lips opened with delight as she gazed at all this.

"Beautiful, is it not, Mademoiselle?" I asked, at last, merely to make her look at me, that I might see again into her eyes.

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"Oh, beautiful! I had never imagined the like!"

"Not even when you were building your castles of the future in the convent?"

She made a little grimace of disgust.

"This is life," she said. "That was not life—it was only the gray shadow of it."

Then suddenly I saw that she shivered.

"You are cold!" I cried. "And you have no cloak—only this thin dress. Come, we must go!"

"Go?" she questioned, looking at me, all her worry back upon her in an instant. "Yes—but whither, Monsieur? Not to my uncle's!"

She was quite white with the horror of the thought, and I felt that her hand was trembling. I pressed it in both of mine—a child's hand, I repeated to myself.

"No, not back to your uncle's," I assured her. "But you must go somewhere for the night. Could you not return to the convent?"

She breathed a deep sigh of relief and the color swept back into her cheeks again. But she shook her head in answer to my question.

"I had thought of that," she said; "but they would deliver me again to my uncle in the morning, Monsieur."

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"True," I murmured, and I pondered over the problem deeply. Clearly, there was only one thing to be done, but it could hardly fail to compromise her, and I paused. I had need to be very sure of myself.

"Mademoiselle," I said, at last, "you believe me to be a man of honor, do you not?"

"Oh, yes," she answered, and she looked at me and smiled again.

"I pray you to believe me so, Mademoiselle," I continued earnestly. "I am going to assume a brother's right to protect you. To-morrow, I shall call upon your uncle, and will say a few things to him which I trust will bring him to his senses. But to-night, since you cannot remain in the gardens here, you must pass in my room."

She glanced at me with frightened eyes, but my face reassured her.

"Very well, M. le Moyne," she answered quietly. "As I said before, I believe you to be a man of honor."

I lifted her hand to my lips and kissed it.

"I appreciate your trust, Mademoiselle," I said, "and shall do everything in my power to deserve it."

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She glanced at me again and I saw that her eyes were shining.

"Come, let us go," she said, and we arose.

"The house I occupy, Mademoiselle," I explained, as we started away, "is in the Rue du Chantre, and the room is but a poor affair, yet I trust you will find it comfortable. I have been in Paris only a week, and have not yet found better lodgings. In fact," I added, judging it best to tell her the whole truth at a breath, "my fortune is not a large one, and not knowing how soon I should be able to increase it, I judged it best to husband it as much as possible."

"There, there, Monsieur," she cried, "do not apologize, I beg of you! You forget that I have no claim upon you and that what you are doing is out of charity, without hope of reward."

A reply leaped to my lips as I looked into her eyes, but I choked it back and we passed through the streets in silence. In my heart I felt a great tenderness for this innocent and confiding creature, who leaned so naturally upon my arm, and who evidently had heretofore gazed upon the world only from a distance, comprehending nothing of what she saw; but I reflected that I, who knew not how

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to support myself, certainly could not hope to support a wife also, and put the thought behind me.

The Rue St. Honoré was crowded as we left the garden and turned into it, and the front of the Palais Royal brilliantly lighted, but every one was occupied with his own affairs and we seemed to be unobserved. Pushing our way through the crowd, we soon reached the Rue du Chantre. The street grew more and more deserted as we left the Rue St. Honoré behind.

"This is the place, Mademoiselle," I said, at last, and as we entered the house together I saw the old woman who acted as concierge, and whom I had come to detest even in a week's time, leering at us horribly. My blood was boiling as I caught the meaning of her grimace, but I said nothing, fearing to alarm my companion, and we slowly mounted the dark staircase.

"'Tis on the third floor," I said, and we kept on, awakening a thousand echoes. "This is the door, Mademoiselle. I will open it. There is a candle on the table. Good-night."

I took her hand, which I felt was trembling.

"And you?" she asked in a whisper.

"I will remain here," I said. "I will sleep upon

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the threshold. No one can enter without arousing me, so that you may sleep calmly without fear. Good-night."

"Good-night," she answered, and there were tears in her voice. She lingered yet a moment, as though there were something she still wished to say, then entered the room and closed the door behind her. I heard her moving about for a few moments, and then all was still.

I sat down upon the top step of the staircase and considered the situation. I confess it appeared to me an awkward one, for, though I had spoken so confidently to her, I had small hope that whatever I might say would have any weight with her ogre of an uncle. He doubtless detested me as heartily as I did him, and it was not to be denied that he had the law behind him, though in this instance, as in many others, quite divorced from justice. I trembled at thought of the blow her reputation must sustain if it were known that for a night she had been my guest—the face of the concierge, as I had seen it leer at us, gave earnest of what the whole gay, evil world of Paris would believe. I tore my kerchief from my throat, for the thought suffocated me. No one should ever know—how

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could they, in this great, seething, clamorous city? And if they did—if any dared to hint—thank God, I could answer with my sword!

He had thought me her lover—curse his shifty, treacherous eyes! Perhaps she had a lover—and I winced at the thought. But no, I would not believe it! She would have told me. She would have asked me to take her to him. And besides, I reflected, with a sigh of relief, she had said that she had left the convent a week before only to find her uncle's house another prison. She could not have made such progress in knowledge of the world in so short a time—indeed the frankness of her look was proof enough.

With this thought, which somehow soothed and pleased me, I wrapped my cloak about me, and sword at side, lay down athwart the threshold. A vision of her sweet face danced before me—her eyes looked into mine, pure and limpid as twin stars. Marvelling at their guilelessness, I bent to kiss their rosy lids. Still they gazed at me, serene, untroubled, and I stopped, shamed in my inmost consciousness, as one who had thought to desecrate a flower.

CHAPTER III

I FIND MY PART A DIFFICULT ONE

I AWOKE with a start and looked about me, but could discern nothing, for the darkness was absolute, impenetrable. What it was that had disturbed me I could not guess. I was about to tell myself I had been dreaming, when I heard a stealthy foot-step on the stair. A second followed. Some one was mounting cautiously. With heart leaping at promise of adventure, I grasped my sword and sat upright, noiselessly. The steps drew near and nearer; they were at the top of the stair—and in an instant some one had stumbled over my extended legs and come down with a crash upon the floor. I was upon the intruder in a flash, and was astonished to find it was a woman.

“Who are you?” I whispered fiercely, between my teeth. “And what seek you here?”

“Rather tell me what you seek here, Monsieur,” answered a voice twisted and quivering with rage and malice, but which I nevertheless recognized as

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that of the concierge. "You have rented the apartment, but not the landing in front of it."

"I will occupy the landing no longer than tonight," I said. "But you have not yet told me your business here."

"I am going to bed," she answered sullenly. "My room is the one at the end of the corridor."

"Go, then," I said, loosing my hold of her, my suspicions not yet allayed. "But remember that I shall still be here and it would be well for you to remain in your room till morning. Another fall such as that might snap some of your dry, old, rotten bones."

The woman got slowly to her feet and I could hear her cursing softly to herself. She took a step away from me and paused. I could guess what her face was like!

"Since when has it been the fashion," she snarled, "for a young man to give up his bed to a pretty girl and himself sleep without the door? It was not so in my day."

"I can well believe it!" I retorted. "Begone!"

She shuffled slowly down the passage. I heard the opening and closing of a door and all was still.

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I wrapped my cloak about me once again, but sleep came no more to my eyes. The encounter had filled me with uneasiness. That she was simply on the way to her room, as she had said, I did not believe, but what her object was I could not guess. During my whole week's wanderings in the streets of Paris I had encountered no face which repelled me as did hers, with its yellow eyes, its sallow, withered cheeks, its surly, snarling mouth. When I had seen it first, it had struck me as threatening and terrible, and this impression deepened as I saw it oftener. Something, I know not what, about the woman told me that she was trembling at heart, that she lived in a state of constant terror. A suggestion of the gutter and the darkness seemed to cling to her, as though she had dragged herself through an abyss reeking with unspeakable foulness.

I could have sworn that she had read my thought in my eyes the first time I looked at her, so livid did her face become, and this belief disturbed me so that I determined to change my lodging, but had chanced upon no other matching the lightness of my purse. I am not a man to be frightened at phantoms of my own imagining, but as I sat there

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in the darkness I promised myself that another night should find me far from the Rue du Chantre.

Morning came, and the filthy panes of the little window above the stairhead turned from black to gray as I sat there musing. I arose, removed from my clothing the traces of the dirty floor and went down into the court, where I made my toilet at a trough in the yard, keeping one eye upon the stair meanwhile to see that none descended. I had scarce gained the stairhead again, when the door of my room opened, and Mlle. Ribaut appeared framed in the doorway, fresh and rosy as a picture by Watteau.

"Good-morning, M. le Moyne," she cried, and courtesied to me with a grace worthy of Louis's court.

"Good-morning, Mademoiselle," I said, bowing and taking her hand, which, I told myself, was one of the prerogatives of a brother. "I trust you slept well?"

"Never better in my life, Monsieur," she answered gayly. "I have never before been honored with a guard at my door, especially one on whom I could rely so thoroughly."

I bowed again at the compliment, and she must

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have seen the tenderness which I could not keep from my face, for she drew her hand away, and glanced nervously at the floor. I watched her glowing cheek with ravished eyes until, of a sudden, I remembered that a brother would not do so.

"Come, Mademoiselle," I cried, "we must get breakfast. I know a splendid place just around the corner, where they serve the most excellent coffee, and rolls which fairly melt in one's mouth."

"And I am famously hungry," she answered, laughing, her embarrassment forgotten in an instant. "Wait until I get my hat, Monsieur."

She was back in a moment, and we went down the stairs together and out into the street. The morning was bright and warm and the streets were thronged with people. I glanced again at my companion's happy face, and resolved to do nothing which could bring a shade upon it, however difficult I might find the task.

We were soon at the café in the Rue de Beauvais, and the waiter gave us a little table in a corner near the window, whence we could look out upon the busy street. I shall not soon forget that meal. Mlle. Ribaut laughed with delight as the coffee was placed before her, and served it with the prettiest

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grace in the world. As for me, I almost forgot to eat in gazing at her.

"You appear distracted, M. le Moyne," she cried. "I'll wager you are thinking with what an irksome charge you have burdened yourself."

"Not at all, Mademoiselle," I answered quickly. "I was thinking how difficult it is to be a brother to an adorable girl with whom one is just getting acquainted."

"I do not find it at all difficult, Monsieur," and she laughed gayly. "I assure you, I find it delightful to be a sister. I have never before been a sister, Monsieur, and I enjoy having a big brother immensely."

I glanced at her merry face, but saw there only guilelessness and innocent good will. My heart fell within me, and I cursed myself for a fool.

"Well, Mademoiselle," I began.

"Oh, come, Monsieur," she interrupted, "does a man always call his sister Mademoiselle?"

"No more than a sister calls her brother Monsieur," I retorted readily.

"Well, my name is Nanette, as I have already had the honor of telling you," she said.

"And mine is Pierre."

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She clapped her hands together gleefully.

"Splendid!" she cried. "We are getting along famously. I think it is a very pretty name—Pierre. Now, what was it you were about to say?"

In the shock of delight at hearing her pronounce my name, I had quite forgotten. But I rallied my wits with an effort.

"I was about to say that at ten o'clock I shall call upon your uncle. I shall approach him with an assured air, as one who will not brook denial. I shall say to him that you would die rather than consent to this marriage and that you will not return home until he agrees to say no more about it."

"Ah, you do not know my uncle," she said sadly. "Believe me, Pierre, he will never agree."

"In that case," I answered, with a cheerfulness I confess I did not feel, "we will secure a cottage at St. Cloud, or some other delightful place. I will send for my sister who is in retreat at Aignan, and who would joy to come. You will love each other, I am sure. And there we shall all live happily together until your uncle does consent or until an apoplexy carries him off."

"That will be charming!" she cried, with

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dancing eyes. "I almost hope he will not consent, so that it may come true. But, Pierre," and she hesitated.

"Yes?"

"All this will take money," she continued, after a moment, "and you told me your fortune is not great."

"Well, I will increase it," I declared, though I confess I had no idea how I should do so, unless I enlisted as a brigand under that arrant knave and prince of thieves, Cartouche. Yet not even that could I do—there was my sister—I had kissed the cross—you shall hear.

She was silenced for a moment, and then took a purse from the bosom of her dress.

"Will you keep this for me," she asked, "and use it when there is need? 'Tis what I brought from home with me, my sweetmeat money."

"Impossible," I protested. "Keep your money, Mademoiselle."

She looked at me a moment with quivering lips.

"That is not like my brother," she said at last. "My brother would understand that I do not wish to be a burden to him. At least, he would consent to keep it for me, for fear that I might lose it."

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I reached out, took the purse, and placed it carefully in my bosom.

"When you wish it again, you have only to ask for it, Nanette," I said.

"That is better," and her face cleared. "And now, Pierre, what shall I do while you are conferring with my uncle?"

"I think it will be best for you to remain in my room," I answered, after a moment's thought. "I will return there at once, so soon as I have seen him, and if I am unsuccessful we can set about securing that cottage I mentioned a moment ago."

"Very well," she said sedately. "And I assure you that I shall not be idle. I saw some clothing in your room this morning that was oh, so badly in need of repair. I intend to make you a good sister, Pierre."

"A good sister!" I murmured, and bit my tongue to keep it still.

"Yes, a good sister," and then she looked at me, her face suddenly serious. "But there is one thing that must be remedied—I know so little about my brother. You must tell me more, Pierre."

"Ah, I should love to!" I cried. "And you really care to know?"



Who, looking deep into her eyes, could have lacked inspiration ?

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"All! All!" she nodded, and leaned towards me, her chin in her hands, her elbows on the table. "Of my life I told you in a sentence—I have done nothing—nothing has happened to me. But with you, it is different—you are a man. You have lived always in the great world."

I looked at the curve of her dainty wrists, the little pink, interlocked fingers, the cheeks soft and delicate as peach-bloom, and then up into the eyes, dark, pure and quite fathomless. I pinched my leg beneath the table to make sure I was not dreaming. Was ever youth so fortunate?

"We have an hour," she concluded. "You are going to see my uncle at ten—it is not yet nine. So you will have time to tell me all—every word."

"Yes, every word," I echoed. "But shall it be here, or——"

"Oh, here! Here it is so cosey, so homelike, and we seem to have known each other for ages instead of merely since last night. Can it be that I have known you only since last night?"

"No," I said, with conviction. "We have known each other long and long, only fate held us apart. Now we can laugh at fate."

"Yes. But the story."

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“Very well—the story.”

“And, mind—no skipping!” she cried, shaking her finger at me warningly. “I must have every word.”

Who, looking deep into her eyes, could have lacked inspiration?

CHAPTER IV

IN WHICH I COME TO PARIS

BUT it was not to tell that story I set pen to paper. Indeed, it were scarce worth the telling, save to sympathetic ears, such as were those tiny pink ones into which I poured it that morning.

Yet, two words about it.

We of Marsan have not always been so poor. Time was, when, as fief of the house of Cauteret, we held broad fields and deep woods. Unfortunately, M. le Comte, being half-Spanish himself, was so foolish as to espouse the Spanish side in one of the innumerable intrigues against the thirteenth Louis—they trod so fast upon each other's heels that I never knew just which it was. At any rate, in the event, M. le Comte was fain to seek safety on his wife's estates at Valladolid, and rode away merrily enough, little regretting France.

We le Moynes, though we had followed M. le Comte to battle as in duty bound, were honest enough to refuse to change our French coats for Spanish ones, and so remained behind. We were

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too small fry to attract the displeasure of the King, who had a host of greater cares to worry him, so we were left to follow our own devices and keep ourselves from starving as best we might.

The sixty years preceding my arrival had been spent by the le Moynes getting a living as honestly as might be, and if we found a bit of brigandage needful now and again to keep body and soul together, why, we were ever ready to answer for it, man to man.

It was in a small house of stone on the right bank of the Midouze I first saw the light. My father I never knew—he had been killed in some foray a month or two before my birth—but my mother continued living on there with her husband's brother, Chabert le Moyne, and his wife. The first ten or twelve years of my life passed peacefully enough, my mother giving me such instruction as she could, and insisting that I go with her every Saturday morning, wet or shine, to the curé for my lesson. The remainder of the time I spent as it pleased me—wandering along the river or paddling about in it; or exploring the great forest, which had one time belonged to M. le Comte, but which was now the King's.

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But at the age of twelve, my uncle Chabert took me suddenly in hand. This was the more surprising because, up to that time, he had taken not the slightest notice of me, save to assist me with his toe whenever he chanced to find me scrambling out of his way. But now, all this was changed. I must learn to ride, it seemed; to shoot with the pistol, and to use dagger and rapier. I tell you, he kept me busy—and how I relished it! There were some hard falls, just at the first, that shook the teeth in my head, until I learned the trick of sticking to my horse's back, but after that only the long rides and the bouts with my uncle. He seldom let me escape without a tap or two on the crown, just to show me what a booby with the blade I was, but I thought nothing of such petty things.

He was a tall, lean man, this uncle of mine, with moustache twisted to a needle-point above a mouth which never opened needlessly. His eyes, too, I remember—few cared to meet them at any time, none when he was enwrathed. A dozen blackguards, who lived somewhere near by—God knows where!—called him master and would have joyfully gone to hell for him. Sometimes they

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would gather at the house at nightfall, my uncle would kiss his wife and stamp out to his horse. I, looking big-eyed from one corner of the little window in my bedroom, would see him fling himself into the saddle and spur away, the others falling naturally in behind.

It was enough to make one tremble, and if I ventured down the ladder into the room where my aunt and mother were—pretending I wanted a drink or some such thing—I would find them in tears, and my mother would look at me sorrowfully and draw me tenderly to her and weep over me, as though some dreadful fate threatened me. The days that followed, they would spend in horrible suspense, and how they would welcome him when he came riding home again!

I understood nothing of all this, but my sister did. For it was at this time she came home from the convent at Aignan, where the good sisters had been caring for her. She had been sent there, a mere baby, at the time my mother was expecting me, and she had been kept there since, we being too poor to feed another mouth, and the good sisters hoping that she would in the end enter the cloister. But when the time came, she found herself lacking

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in courage or devotion—I do not know, for this is one of the things about her I never quite understood—and so she was sent home again. At least, here she was, tall and fair and dark-eyed, and we were all a little afraid of her until we found how warm and tender her heart was. Yes, and brave, too,—how could I have said she lacked courage?—as I was presently to find out for myself.

It was one evening in early June. As the twilight deepened along the river, I heard far off the tramp of horses and knew that another journey was afoot. I went to the door to see them dash up along the road, and very fine and brave they looked to me. They pulled full-stop at the door, harness clanking, sword rattling against thigh, and my uncle, who was at table, hastily swallowed the last of his meat, and rose to don sword and head-gear. I, who was still gaping out the door, heard the sound of my sister's voice.

“Where do you go, uncle?” she asked.

He was girding on his sword, and paused an instant to look at her in sheer amazement. Then he turned away without answering.

“If it be upon a Godless errand you go, as I sus-

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pect," she went, on, quite calm and steady, "I pray you to think of your soul. What of it?"

My faith, but I was trembling for her and the women staring open-mouthed!

I saw my uncle's face darken, but he drew on his gauntlets and turned to the door, saying never a word. He found her before him. For a moment he stood looking into her eyes with a gaze that brought the sweat to my forehead. I protest I am no coward, but I could not look in his face—no, not even now—with such calm as hers.

But the moment passed. With a swift movement of his hand, he swept her from his path and strode from the house. We heard him leap to saddle and then the clatter of hoofs down the road. The girl stood silent, listening, until the distance swallowed up the sound.

"He will not come back," she said at last, with the air of a prophetess. "The Virgin told me so this morning. He will never come back, and he goes to his death unshriven."

Then she went from the room, while terror still held her hearers palsied.

Even yet can I remember the agony of those days, the prayers on our knees before the cross, the

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straining of eyes down the road. And then, at last, in the gray dawn of the fourth day, came the rush of a single horse's hoofs, and a rude clatter at the door. I, peeping out my window, saw a man sitting on his horse—such a man!—mud-stained, blood-stained, unkempt, breathless, with livid fear still on his face and in his eyes. I could hear my aunt fumbling at the bar with trembling hands and then the door opened.

“Le Moyne is dead,” said the man abruptly, in a terrible voice. “So are all the others but one or two. It was an ambush. We thought we had the coach and good plunder, when out they spurred from front and rear, left and right. We had no chance, curse them! but they paid two for one—aye, four for le Moyne. There was a man!” and with a horrible choking in his throat, he struck spur to flank and pushed on.

Well, we lived on in a way—the wood gave us fagots—the earth a little grain—sometimes my snares brought game to table. But what a life for a lusty youth of nineteen, hot with impatience to see the world, yet bound to three women! I loved them, I would not have left them, but how I gnawed my heart out with longing to be gone!

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We were well off the highway, hidden deep in the woods along the river, else we must have fallen prey to violence ere we did, for that sister of mine had grown into a woman fit to make men mad to look at. But it came at last.

I was staggering home one day under a load of fagots from the wood—what disgrace for a le Moyne to gather fagots! Mordieu, it makes me warm even yet to think of! Well, I was staggering home, and cursing my unhappy fate, when of a sudden I heard a woman scream, and knew the voice for my sister's. I dropped the fagots and ran forward, stooping low to avoid the branches. In a moment I was at the house.

Before it were three horses, one of them bestrode by the finest gentleman I had ever seen, the others riderless. Through the open door came the sounds of a struggle.

"What is it?" I demanded roughly. "What do you here, Monsieur?"

He scarcely deigned me a glance.

"Be off, canaille!" he said, and turned to the door. "Bring her out," he cried, "but so much as a bruise and I'll kill you both."

And there appeared in the doorway two ruffians, bearing my sister between them.

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Then I understood, and my blood turned to fire.

How I did it, I know no more now than I did then, but I sprang upon them and flung them right and left—one crashing against the door-post, the other backward into the road that I might stamp his life out. I heard a curse behind me, and a whip was brought hissing down across my face—see, there is the scar, just at the corner of my eye. But I turned on him like the wild beast I in that moment felt myself to be and dragged him down from the saddle. I knew the others would be upon me, that I could not escape, but I prayed Christ that I might kill him first. I had him by the throat, bending him backward; I saw his eyes start, his tongue swell—and then heavy steps behind me. I waited the stab that I knew must come. Ah, my brave sister! it was you who saved me, seizing my sword from the scabbard as it hung just within the door, and using it how well!

One rode away hot-foot, in safety. The others lay where they had fallen, and we staring down at them. Then my sister looked at the red blade in her hand and dropped it, shuddering and faint.

“Their blood is on their own hands, not on ours,” I said. “Why did they not pass in peace?”

“Yes, why did they not?” and she stared down

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at them. "I was here, alone, the others had gone to wash at the river, when they came by. He saw me, and—oh, infamous! The world is well rid of him!"

I saw the other women coming towards us under the trees, and then of a sudden I knew our danger.

"We cannot stay here," I cried. "They will be back again. The one who fled will bring them, hot for vengeance. We must go!"

The women looked down the road, white-faced.

"Not you others, perhaps," I said. "You were not here—they will not seek for you. But we—I and my sister—must go."

"Yes—but whither?" asked my aunt.

Whither? I did not know. I did not care. Here there was only death.

It was my sister who proved the wisest—then as always.

"I will go to Aignan," she said, with a calmness that astonished me. "The good sisters will protect me and give me sanctuary. You, dear Pierre, must go farther—to some great city, where you can lose yourself for a time."

My blood was tingling. I knew whither I would go.

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"To Paris!" I cried. "To Paris!"

My mother uttered a little cry of horror.

"Paris! Oh, no, Pierre! How can you cover those two hundred leagues?"

My eyes were on the horse, which stood patiently by its master, waiting for him to rise and mount.

"The horse will carry me," I said. "Yes, and provide me money at my journey's end."

She would have protested, would have pleaded, but I broke away into the house, donned the best suit my uncle had left behind, stretching it somewhat in the struggle, buckled on sword and dagger, and was ready. Never had I felt so strong, so confident. At last was I to have a bout with fortune!

But money? I had little—well—and then, as I left the house, I saw again the gallant lying stark in the dust. Perhaps in his pockets were broad gold-pieces—a jewel flashed on his finger—but even as I stooped, a hand was laid on my shoulder, and I turned to find myself looking into my sister's eyes.

"Not that, Pierre," she said hoarsely. "For Christ's sake, not that! The le Moynes have been thieves long enough—now let them be honest men!"

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I felt my throat contract and my eyes grow wet.

"But I cannot starve," I faltered, cursing my own weakness.

I saw the blood die from her lips.

"Here, take this!" she cried, and she tore open her gown and snatched a cross from her bosom. I saw that it was of gold. "It was given to me," she said, "at Aignan. Now I give it to you to buy bread. It is the dearest thing I have, but I give it gladly, for I am ransoming your soul. Henceforth the le Moynes will be honest men."

I could not speak, but I dropped at her feet and kissed the cross as she held it down to me. It is an oath, thank God, I have never broken.

"And you will not sell the horse," she added—what a woman she was! "You will ride him as far as Tours. There you will deliver him to a coureur to be returned to Marsan. I will see that he is claimed. Good-by, dear Pierre," and she held up her lips.

I kissed her as I would have kissed the Virgin, then my mother and aunt. They seemed quite broken, yet it was clear we must be off. To Marsan and back was only a matter of three hours, and near an hour of this was already gone. I

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sprang to saddle and looked at them all, once again, standing there in the road. Then I touched spur to flank and was off.

And so, in the course of days, I came to Tours, where I sold the cross and delivered the horse to the coureur. Then to Paris, where I arrived at last, weary and somewhat stained by the road, yet with ten pistoles in my pocket, a good sword at my side, and a light heart in my bosom—the heart of youth!

Two words, did I say? How memory makes one garrulous!

CHAPTER V

M. RIBAUT IS OBDURATE

SHE sat looking at me for a moment without speaking, her chin in her hands, her eyes bright.

"That is life!" she said, at last. "That is living! That is what I long for! And, oh, how I shall love your sister! What is her name, Pierre?"

"Ninon," I answered.

"Ninon!" and she lingered on the word. "Why, that is almost Nanette! Oh, that I could see her, now—this moment!"

"Perhaps you soon will—that cottage at St. Cloud, you know," and I smiled at her eager face. "Come, it is time for me to pay my respects to your amiable uncle."

She gave a little gasp.

"And you are not afraid?" she asked. "Do you think he will harm you, Pierre?"

"Harm me?" I laughed. "No," and I touched the hilt of my sword. "There is nothing to fear—on my account. Come."

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She arose with a little sigh, and paused in the doorway for a backward look.

"But I have been happy here," she said softly, and together we passed out into the street.

We made our way back to the Rue du Chantre in silence. She seemed oppressed by some foreboding, and I was considering what I would best say to her uncle. It was not an easy matter to decide—I felt that, in this case, I should be readier with my sword than with my tongue, I hated him so already! We entered the little court and paused at the stairfoot.

"I will leave you here, Nanette," I said. "I shall not be long away."

She answered with a pressure of the hand and smiled into my eyes. How often, afterwards, in my dreams, did I see her standing so!

I watched her for a moment as she mounted the stair, and then turned away. I caught a glimpse of the hideous concierge leering at me from her box, and hurried from the place, disgusted, resolved anew to seek another lodging. On through the streets I pressed, for I was anxious to have my errand done—along the crowded, clamorous Rue St. Honoré, to the Rue des Frondeurs, then to

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the Rue de l'Evêque—with leaping heart I saw again the corner where Nanette had sought shelter in my arms, months ago, it seemed!—and so onward across the Rue des Orties, to the Rue des Moulins.

She had described the house for me, and I had no difficulty in finding it, for a gilded board, bearing the legend

JACQUES RIBAUT,
BIJOUTIER.

projected into the street. I mounted the steps and knocked at the door, noting as I did so that the house was a large one and in good repair, a thing somewhat uncommon in Paris. A servant answered the knock, and I was surprised to see that he was in livery. M. Jacques Ribaut must indeed be wealthy.

“Is M. Ribaut within?” I asked.

“Yes, Monsieur.”

“I wish to see him,” and, as the man hesitated,

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I added, "Tell him it is some one who brings him news from his niece."

"Wait just a moment, Monsieur," and the man disappeared down the hallway. He was back almost immediately.

"You are to enter, Monsieur," he said, and I followed him down the hall. He opened a door before me, and I was in the presence of a little fat man whom I recognized at once. He knew me also, and he leaned back in his chair and gazed at me, his eyes agleam with hatred.

"What is your price, Monsieur?" he asked abruptly.

I stared at him in amazement.

"I do not understand," I said, after a moment.

"Oh, come," he burst out, his anger getting the better of him, "let us descend from the heights and get to business. You have possession, I suppose, of the body of my niece. I ask you what price you demand to deliver her to me?"

I felt my cheeks burning, but I determined to keep my temper.

"Monsieur," I answered as quietly as I could, "my price is your promise to break off at once this wedding which you propose and to sign in the

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presence of witnesses a paper which I shall have executed in which you will agree to permit your niece to choose her own husband."

"Believing, doubtless, that she will choose you!" he sneered. "May I ask, Monsieur, where you met my niece?"

"In the Rue de l'Evêque, as you know."

"You had never met her before last night?"

"No. I had never seen her before that."

He gazed at me astonished, for he saw that I spoke the truth.

"May I ask your name, Monsieur?" he said.

"Pierre le Moyne."

"And your home?"

"Mont-de-Marsan."

"I might have guessed it!" he cried. "Only a Gascon would attempt a thing so ridiculous. Come, Monsieur, return me my niece and cease this farce. It has been carried too far already. You imagine, doubtless, that you are performing one of those Quixotic deeds for which your countrymen are famous, but you do not understand the situation. This husband whom I have chosen for my niece is M. Briquet, a wealthy and respected man, well fitted to make her happy. She is young and does not

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know her own mind. She has been bred in a convent and has arranged some little romance for herself, in which the hero is doubtless a prince, young, rich, and beautiful. She forgets that she is a poor girl and that her marriage portion is hardly worth considering. M. Briquet is a good match—better than could have been hoped for. In a year from now she will think him adorable,” and he leered at me in a way that made my flesh creep, “for he is good-natured—he does not ask what has happened since last night—he will not set watch on her too closely—no doubt there will still be a place for you.”

I felt my blood grow hot against the brute, but I kept close grip on my temper. After all, I had an end to accomplish.

“I have already told you, Monsieur,” I answered, coldly, “on what terms your niece will be returned to you. If she then chooses to marry M. Briquet, well and good. If not, she will marry some one else.”

His self-control slipped from him, as cloak from shoulder, and left his wrath quite naked.

“Mordieu!” he yelled, springing from his chair and shaking his fist in my face, “you speak as

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though you had the right to meddle in this affair. I will call in the law! I will have you thrown into the conciergerie! I will compel you to return the girl!"

"Perhaps the law might also inquire why you are so anxious to have her become Madame Briquet," I retorted, for want of something better, and paused in astonishment. He had fallen back into his chair, his face livid. What possessed the man?

"Get out of here!" he screamed, when he had regained the power of speech. "Get out of here, and tell your harlot never to show her face here again, or I will denounce her as a woman of the town!"

He got no farther, for I was upon him, all my blood in my face. I caught him up from the chair and smote him in the mouth with my open hand.

"You dog!" I cried. "You dog!" and I struck him again.

"Murder!" he shrieked. "Help! He is killing me!"

I heard steps rushing down the hallway and the door behind me opened. With a last blow I hurled Ribaut back into his chair and turned towards the door, facing a man whom, from his surpassing ugliness,

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ness, I knew instantly to be Briquet. I had never seen a countenance more repulsive, and I looked at him with loathing.

"Who are you, Monsieur," he cried, "and what do you here?"

"I am punishing that scoundrel yonder for daring to ask his niece to marry another scoundrel such as you!" I answered, and I looked him in the eyes, all my contempt in my face.

His face went from red to purple.

"Kill him!" screamed Ribaut from the chair where he sat, the blood streaming from nose and mouth. "It was he who took the girl from me."

With an oath, Briquet snatched a pistol from his pocket. But I was too quick for him, for, seizing a chair, I knocked the barrel up even as he pulled the trigger and brought the chair down upon his head. He fell like an ox.

"Ribaut," I said, turning to the miserable object cowering in the chair, "if I gave you your deserts I would kill you like the cur you are, but I scorn to draw my sword against such vermin. I warn you that if you so much as lift your finger against that girl you shall pay for it with your life," and fearing that my passion would yet get the better

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of me, I turned from the room, strode down the hallway and left the house.

As I made my way to the Rue du Chantre I tried in vain to solve the mystery of which I had caught but a glimpse—the terror of Ribaut, the ferocity of Briquet, the evident understanding between the two. Why were they determined to sacrifice the girl? I could find no answer to the question, and I turned to another problem which demanded immediate solution.

How was I to provide for her now that the die was cast? I remembered with a melancholy accuracy that my fortune was limited to the contents of my purse and that my purse was anything but heavy. What a cottage at St. Cloud would cost I dared not think, and then a wardrobe had also to be provided, since she had brought with her only the clothes she wore.

It was with this problem weighing on my mind that I turned into the entrance and slowly mounted the stairs to my room. I knocked at the door, but there was no response. With a great fear at my heart I flung the door open and entered. One glance told me that the room was empty. Chairs had been overturned, the lock of the door was

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broken. With a trembling hand I picked up a garment in which there was still a threaded needle. I could read the story at a glance. She had been surprised, overpowered, carried away. And in the moment of agony that followed I knew that I loved her.

CHAPTER VI

RIBAUT PLAYS A CARD

I STOOD for a moment dazed by this unexpected blow, for which I had been wholly unprepared. From what direction had it come? Clearly not from Ribaut, since I had been with him all the time. From whom, then? And in an instant I remembered the mysterious actions of the old woman who had fallen over my feet the night before. I ran down the stairs like the wind, and as I reached the court I perceived her sitting in her ruinous little lodge. I drew my sword, threw the door open and entered.

"Madame," I said, with all the calmness I could muster, "you will tell me at once what has happened to the lady who was in my room."

She crouched back in her chair away from the point at her throat and looked at me with venomous eyes.

"I know nothing about it," she snarled. "You will have to look elsewhere, my fine blade."

"No lies!" I said sharply. "You cannot de-

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ceive me. She could not have been carried off without you seeing it, even if you did not lend a hand."

"Carried off, indeed!" she retorted with a sneer. "And what if she had simply grown weary of you and took the first chance to escape? On my word, I should not blame her!"

"She did not go away of her own will," I said, quite positively. "She was carried away. Tell me what you saw."

"I saw nothing," she repeated sullenly.

"Very well," I said between my teeth, "it seems you are prepared to die, then. Say your prayers. Commend your soul to God, if you possess one, for I warn you that I will kill you as I would a snake, without an instant's hesitation."

She looked at me for a moment, her eyes glittering, her face livid, her mouth working convulsively. She licked her lips and swallowed with an effort.

"Come," I repeated, "you have nothing more to say then?" and my sword quivered in my hand.

She saw I was in earnest.

"I will tell you what I know, Monsieur," she said at last.

"Good. That is the only way to save your life,"

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and I lowered my point. "If I find you lying to me, you shall die none the less surely."

"All that I know, Monsieur, is that ten minutes after you had left three men entered. One remained on guard here, while the others mounted the stair. In a moment they returned, bringing the lady with them. Despite her struggles, they placed her in a coach which was waiting in the street, and drove away as fast as their horses could take them."

"And who were these men?" I asked. "Where did they take the girl?"

"I do not know, Monsieur."

"You lie!" I cried fiercely. "It was you who set them on! It was you who told them she was alone! Tell me who they were!"

She was snarling again from the depths of her chair, and I looked at her in disgust.

"Come," I repeated after a moment, "you must tell me. There is no way of escaping it."

I saw her glance past me into the court, and heard footsteps on the stones without. I turned to see two men standing there.

"Is there a gentleman lodged here by the name of Pierre le Moyne?" asked one of them.

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"That is my name," I answered.

"Will you be good enough to accompany us, Monsieur?"

"And why?" I inquired.

"We have been commissioned to conduct you to M. d'Argenson, lieutenant of police," he answered. "He will doubtless explain everything to you, Monsieur."

"I am under arrest, then?" I asked, with a sinking heart.

"If you choose to call it so, Monsieur," and the man bowed.

I heard the concierge chuckling savagely in her chair behind me.

"Very well," I said, after a moment's reflection, "I shall be very glad to see M. le Comte d'Argenson. But I have some clothing and other property in my room here which I do not care to have stolen."

"We will seal the door, Monsieur, if you will show us the room. Nothing will then be disturbed in your absence."

I led the way to the room and we entered.

"We were also instructed to bring to M. d'Argenson a girl named Anne Ribaut," said the fel-

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low, looking about the room and seeing it empty.

"Where is she, Monsieur?"

"I do not know," I answered bitterly. "I left her here an hour since. When I returned she had disappeared. Look at the condition of the room, Monsieur, and judge if she went willingly."

They looked about the room with practised eyes, which took in every detail.

"Have you a theory, Monsieur?" asked one of them at last.

"Only that the woman who is concierge knows more about it than she cares to tell," I answered. "I was endeavoring to force a confession from her at the point of my sword when you interrupted me."

"Ah," and the man smiled. "We must look into that. If she has anything to tell she will tell it, Monsieur, rest assured of that. We have a more effective method of securing confessions than the sword-point," and he smiled again.

They made another careful survey of the place, disturbing nothing, and then, motioning me to follow, left the room and sealed the door behind them. We descended to the court, but found that the concierge was no longer in her lodge.

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"We shall get her, Monsieur, never fear," one of them remarked. "No one can escape us in Paris."

I doubted this somewhat, but deemed it best to say nothing, and followed them into the street. They led the way to the Rue St. Honoré, turned down the Bons Enfants, and entered at one of the smaller doors of the Palais Royal. In a moment we were in an ante-chamber which was crowded with people, many of whom shot curious glances at me as we passed. Here there was a short delay, and then we were shown into a room where a man sat writing at a table.

I looked at him with interest, for that this was the renowned Comte Voyer d'Argenson, who had organized the police system of Paris into the most perfect in the world, I did not doubt. At the first glance I was struck by nothing so much as his surpassing ugliness, for his face was horribly disfigured by small-pox, and yet when I looked again this impression faded imperceptibly and I saw only a man with kindly eyes and winning mouth.

He listened in silence to the report of the men who had arrested me, glancing keenly at my face

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once or twice, but for the most part playing with the pen he still held in his hand.

"Very good," he said, as the report was concluded. "I need not tell you that it is necessary to arrest this woman. Do so without delay, and find out everything possible about her past. You may go."

They went out and closed the door behind them.

"Sit down, M. le Moyne," he continued, and I fancied I detected a trace of kindness in his voice. "I should be glad to hear your story of your connection with Mlle. Ribaut."

"May I ask first, Monsieur," I questioned, "why I have been arrested?"

"You are charged with the abduction and detention of the girl, with drawing your sword against her legal guardian, M. Jacques Ribaut, and with subsequently assaulting him and his friend, M. Jean Briquet, at his residence in the Rue des Moulins. Luckily, they were not injured seriously, and so could lodge complaint against you without delay."

"But they did not know my lodging," I protested, looking at him with bewildered eyes. "How was I found so speedily?"

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D'Argenson smiled and turned to a great book which lay beside him on the table.

"Listen," he said, and opened it. "Ah, here it is," he added, after turning a page or two. "An entry on this page reads as follows, under date of July 10: 'Pierre le Moyne, age about twenty, brown hair, brown eyes, well built, entered by the Porte St. Antoine at sunrise. Found lodging at the Epée Flamboyante, Rue du Chantre. A Gascon, Mont-de-Marsan. Unsuspected.'"

He smiled again as he glanced at my astonished face.

"It is our record," he said, "of all strangers who enter Paris. We have agents at every gate—a simple thing. You see we had you under our hand."

Still I could not speak. It was incredible. But I began to understand how no one could escape M. D'Argenson.

"As to the charges," he added more gravely, "I trust they are not true, M. le Moyne, for they are of a most serious nature."

CHAPTER VII

I AM FORTUNATE IN FINDING A NEW FRIEND

I SAT looking at him without answering, dismayed somewhat at the gravity of his face. Yet there were still the kindly eyes and mouth—surely I need fear no injustice from this man!

“I will tell you the story, M. le Comte,” I said, after a moment’s thought. “You shall judge for yourself in how far I am guilty.” And I gave him a detailed account of everything that had happened from the moment I had encountered Mlle. Ribaut in the Rue de l’Evêque until the moment of my arrest. D’Argenson did not once interrupt me, but glanced at me keenly from time to time, and remained for a moment silent after I had finished.

“M. le Moyne,” he said at last, “I need not tell you that you have been setting the law at defiance in all this, and that however I may respect you as a man of honor, as lieutenant of police there is only one course open to me, and that is to punish you. A father or legal guardian has an absolute and unquestioned right to dispose of a girl’s hand

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in marriage. There are only two conditions under which this right can be called into question. One is when there is some legal impediment which would prevent the marriage and which is being concealed. The other is when the proposed marriage is in the nature of a conspiracy, for the purpose of defrauding the girl in some way, or of doing her some other wrong."

"Ah, Monsieur," I cried, "if you could but see this creature, this Briquet! He is hideous, horrible! It seems to me that it is wrong enough that any girl should be compelled to marry him and live with such a monster."

D'Argenson laughed bitterly.

"I have seen him, M. le Moyne," he said. "It was he who came here to make complaint against you on behalf of M. Ribaut. I confess he is not lovely, but you could scarce expect me to take action on that ground, else I should be pronouncing a decree against my own countenance."

"But there is a difference, M. le Comte!" I cried, and I wondered that I had ever thought him repulsive. "Mere irregularity of features, or even disfigurement, does not constitute ugliness. No countenance is offensive, Monsieur, which is

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lighted by kindly eyes and a smiling mouth. It is not so with Briquet. One shrinks from him instinctively as from a snake."

D'Argenson did not answer, but sat musing deeply.

At last he raised his head.

"M. le Moyne," he said, his eyes full on mine, "tell me truly why you came to Paris. It was not merely to seek your fortune?"

His eyes seemed to be reading my very heart. I had no thought of telling aught but the truth. So the truth I told, just as I had told Nanette, only more briefly—the attack on my sister and my killing of the libertine who had ordered it. Neither this time did M. le Comte interrupt me, but sat listening quietly, only looking at me with those eyes there was no denying. He was smiling when I ended, and I took courage.

"You have strong hearts, you le Moynes, men and women," he said. "Some rumor of this affair hath reached Paris, only in another guise. It was that M. Philippe de Nizan and two attendants had been set upon by a gang of outlaws, and de Nizan and one of his men killed. The other, who escaped, told a pretty story of the fight, doubtless

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to save his own reputation. But I knew he was lying, for private advices from Marsan tell me that not a jewel nor pistole had been stolen. Only one of the horses was missing."

"I rode it away, as I told you, M. le Comte," I protested earnestly. "It has been sent back from Tours and should be at Marsan by this time awaiting its owner. That will prove the truth of my story, Monsieur."

But D'Argenson silenced me with a gesture of his hand.

"I need no proof, M. le Moyne," he said kindly. "I believe it already. I can detect truth from falsehood—that is why I am head of the police. You did well to trust me."

I turned red with pleasure and tried to stammer my thanks, but he silenced me again.

"If the varlet sticks to his lie, you, of course, will not be troubled," he added. "Should he tell the truth, the whole truth, there could be no charge against you. Should he tell a half-truth, implicating you, I will take a hand in the affair. I can protect you there, because you had the law on your side, but about this other I am not so certain. You have struck at one of the props of our society, and

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there is no crime more serious. If a parent or guardian may not dispose of his child in marriage, we will have simply chaos."

I did not know what to answer. I had no wish to bring about a revolution, yet I knew quite well that I should never permit Nanette to be returned to her infamous uncle—but I could not say that to M. le Comte. He sat for some moments deep in thought, while I tried vainly to discover a way out of the coil.

"Well, M. le Moyne," he said at last, "it is evident that the most important thing now is to find the girl, since she is no longer with you. Until that is done and her testimony can be secured, I will see that the charge against you is not pressed."

"And in the mean time," I questioned breathlessly, "I trust you will not think it necessary to send me to prison, M. le Comte?"

"And why not?" he asked smiling.

"Because in prison, Monsieur, I could do nothing towards assisting your agents to recover Mlle. Ribaut."

"I had thought of that," said d'Argenson. "Well, Monsieur, I will give you your freedom on two conditions."

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"And what are they?" I asked.

"One is that you report here to me at eight o'clock every morning so that I can detain you if there is need."

"I agree!" I cried.

"The other is that if you succeed in finding Mlle. Ribaut, you will bring her here to me at once and surrender her into my hands without question."

I hesitated for a moment, but a glance at d'Argenson's face convinced me that he would use me fairly.

"Very well, Monsieur," I said, "I agree to your second condition. But in return I would ask of you one thing."

"And what is that?"

"It is, M. le Comte, that you make a little inquiry into the affairs of Ribaut and Briquet. I am certain that a conspiracy of some kind does exist," and I told him of Ribaut's terror, when, for want of something better to say, I had threatened him with a police investigation.

"It may be as you say," assented d'Argenson thoughtfully. "At any rate, I will gladly do as you suggest, for I do not conceal from you, M. le Moyne, that my heart is with you in this matter."

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I can appreciate a gentleman, Monsieur, wherever I find him," and he arose and gave me his hand. "If I can aid you in any way, I will do so—I can promise you that much. Adieu, Monsieur, and do not forget to report to-morrow morning. I may have some news for you."

I pressed his hand warmly, thanked him, and took my leave. Evening was already at hand as I reached the street, and my stomach reminded me that I had eaten nothing since morning. I sought out the café in the Rue de Beauvais where we had breakfasted, and as I ate my solitary meal, I saw again before me the laughing, piquant face of Nannette Ribaut. I lingered at the table, revelling in the companionship which my thoughts created for me, and nine o'clock was striking from the Louvre as I once more reached the street. I reflected that I could do nothing better than return to my room and get a good night's rest, for I was accustomed to a softer bed than I had had the night before, and felt greatly fatigued. Besides, it was just possible that the old concierge might return, and nothing would please me so much as to turn her over to d'Argenson, that she might be put to the question.

I was soon at the house, but saw in a moment

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that the lodge of the concierge was dark and deserted. I mounted to my own room, found the seals on the door undisturbed, broke them and entered. My heart was beating madly as I lighted the candle and looked around. It seemed to me that I could still detect the sweet, faint perfume of Nanette's presence in the room. I set to work to repair its disorder, and picked up with reverent fingers the garment upon which she had been working. I did not remove the threaded needle, but resolved that it should remain there, and that I would treasure the worn garment always.

Long time I sat by the table and mused over the day's events. D'Argenson had said that the law was against me, and that, if no impediment was found, Nanette must do her uncle's bidding. I shut my teeth together as I determined that this impediment should be found; that I would penetrate this mystery; that I would prevent this sacrifice. But how, how?

In an agony of apprehension, I prepared for bed. As I removed my doublet, something fell to the floor, and when I stooped to look more closely I saw it was the purse Nanette had given me. I picked it up with trembling hand, and sleep found me with it clasped close against my heart.

CHAPTER VIII

I KEEP AN APPOINTMENT

I AWOKE in the morning strong, refreshed, and hopeful, and I arose without delay, for I was eager to commence the contest. The day was singularly bright and pleasant. It reminded me of the sweet springs I had known in the south, and I descended the stairs with a light heart, confident that I should yet win the victory. That is what it is to be young!

As I passed the lodge of the concierge I saw that there was some one within, and I opened the door to find an old man looking at me.

"Good-day, Monsieur," he said politely. "Is there anything you wish?"

"Are you the concierge?" I asked.

"Since this morning only, Monsieur," he answered.

"Can you tell me what has become of your predecessor?"

"I did not know him, Monsieur."

I looked at the man sharply, but he returned my gaze without winking.

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"How, then, did you obtain the place?" I asked.

"The concierge of the next house, who is a friend of mine, told me there was a vacancy here, so I came and was accepted."

I looked at him again. If he was lying, he was doing it admirably and with a perfect composure.

"Very well, my friend," I said at last. "I trust you will do your duty better than your predecessor. Yesterday my room, which is on the third floor, was entered and some property carried away. You will oblige me by keeping an eye upon my room," and I laid a crown upon the table, for I reflected that I could lose nothing by gaining the friendship of this man, who might, perhaps, be able to assist me.

"Thank you, Monsieur," he said, reddening with pleasure at sight of the coin. "Monsieur may rest assured that his room will not again be disturbed."

"I trust so, at least," I answered, and turned into the street. I knew that eight o'clock could not be far distant, so, without waiting for breakfast, I hastened towards the Palais Royal and was soon in M. d'Argenson's ante-chamber.

It was, if anything, more crowded than on the previous day, and a circumstance which astonished

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me was that so few of those present wore uniforms. Indeed, the crowd which eddied ceaselessly back and forth seemed to be drawn from every rank of life, from the highest to the lowest, and as I glanced over this motley assemblage I gained an idea, vague and meagre no doubt, of the extent of the great system of espionage which the Comte d'Argenson had established, and which penetrated into every corner of Parisian life, like an enormous and insatiable vine, continually throwing out creepers and seeking a fresh foothold in some spot not already occupied. I paused beside a man who seemed to be the gardien, and who attentively scanned all who entered.

"If one wishes to see M. le Comte d'Argenson, Monsieur," I inquired, "how does one proceed?"

"You will find him very busy, Monsieur," he answered, "unless your business is of importance."

"I have an appointment with him at eight o'clock," I said dryly.

"Ah, in that case there will be no trouble. M. d'Argenson allows nothing to interfere with his appointments," and the man smiled. "Give your name to that gentleman whom you see standing by the closed door yonder, Monsieur."

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"Many thanks," I said, and did as he directed. In a few moments the man signalled me to follow him, and led the way into M. d'Argenson's office.

"Good-morning, M. le Moyne," he cried, as I entered. "Take a chair, if you please, and pardon me for one moment," and he resumed the examination of a great number of papers, passing from one to another with incredible rapidity, affixing his signature here, erasing a line there, and laying a few to one side for further consideration.

I had opportunity to examine his face more attentively than had been possible the day before, and, the first impression produced by its disfigurement past, I found it more and more admirable.

The fame of the Comte d'Argenson had penetrated to the four corners of France, until *Le Dammé*, as he was called because of his formidable countenance, had become a word to frighten children with. A thousand stories were told of him, how he commenced his audiences at three o'clock in the morning and worked all day, dictating to four secretaries at once; making his rounds at night in a carriage in which there was a desk lighted by candles, so that no single moment might be lost; facing street riots with a cool courage which made

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him master of the mob; striking home with an absolute disregard of form and precedent, overcoming many obstacles, and achieving his object before another man could have planned the attack.

Certain it was that he had brought order out of chaos, suppressed crime with a rigid hand, and developed a system of espionage so complete that there were few in Paris concerning whose habits and conduct from day to day he could not be fully informed, should he choose to inquire about them. Clothed with an authority almost absolute, he had yet strength to use it gently and wisely; above corruption, discreet, ever leaning towards the merciful; a thorough gentleman, with whom any secret was safe, so that it did not interfere with the law or with the State—a fact which a thousand women knew by experience and thanked God for—it is little wonder that I gazed at him with interest and attention.

“Ah, M. le Moyne,” he said at last, looking up from a paper which he held in his hand, “here is a report which will interest you. The name of the concierge, it seems, is Mère Fouchon—at least, that is the only name she has ever been known to have. She secured her place as concierge in the Rue du

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Chantre nearly five years ago, by means of recommendations which my agents have since discovered were forged. Of her previous history we have as yet been able to ascertain nothing, but we will in time. During the five years she was concierge she made no friends—none, at least, to whom she told anything of her past life. She seems to have emerged from the darkness, and the fact that so little is known concerning her is in itself suspicious. No one, especially no woman, covers up her past unless there is something to conceal. Decidedly, I am interested in Mère Fouchon.”

“And you have not succeeded in finding her, I suppose, Monsieur?” I inquired.

“No,” answered d’Argenson, “she seems to have disappeared completely. She has descended into that darkness from which she emerged five years ago, and she has done it in a way which shows that she has kept in touch with the life of the sewers. But she cannot escape the eyes of my agents, which are everywhere—especially in the Paris which lives underground. We shall hear from her in a day or two, Monsieur, and after that our course will be an easy one.”

There was nothing more to be said, and as d’Ar-

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genson turned to other matters, I left the place and strolled moodily through the streets. I stopped at the first cabaret I came to and ordered breakfast, and, as I ate, endeavored to form some plan which held out at least a promise of success.

I could think of nothing better than to take M. d'Argenson's hint and search those quarters of the town along the river and in the faubourgs where the criminal classes congregated, in the chance of catching a glimpse of Mère Fouchon, but I had little hope of success. To search for a single human being in those swarming dens of vice was a task which even the police found onerous—but I could not sit still with folded hands while Nanette was in danger, and I set about my task without delay.

CHAPTER IX

A DESCENT INTO A CESSPOOL

I TURNED first towards the quays, hoping that in the crowd of beggars, thieves, and cut-throats which swarmed over them I might chance upon the object of my search. The streets were crowded with carriages and heavy carts, which went their way with a fine disregard of the foot-passengers, who kept out of danger as best they could, seeking shelter behind the protections thrown out at each corner, or dodging back and forth under the noses of the horses.

As I crossed the river and turned into the Quai des Théatins, I heard a shrill scream of terror, and witnessed an accident such as happened many times daily in Paris. A child had been knocked down by a passing horse, and lay sprawling on the pavement. In a moment the heavy wheels of a cart would have crushed her, for the crowd regarded the accident with a singular indifference, but I sprang forward with an oath at their carelessness, and dragged her

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to her feet. With two strides I gained the protection of a projecting flight of steps, and paused to look at her.

I saw at a glance that she was a creature of the streets, one of those unfortunate beings with no home but the ash-heaps, no food but that she managed to rescue from the garbage-piles. She might have been ten years old, or twenty, it was impossible to tell—or, rather, it would be more correct to say that her body had the arrested development of a sickly child of ten, her face the preternatural shrewdness and knowledge of a street-woman twice that age. The rags in which she was clothed were horribly dirty, and as I set her again on her feet I shuddered to see that her legs were hideously bowed.

“There, my child,” I said, as I put her down, “you are quite safe now. In future be more careful where you are going. Another time you may not escape so fortunately.”

She looked at me with large eyes, in which there was a trace of tears.

“Yes, Monsieur,” she said. “You are very kind.”

“There, run along,” I answered, touched with

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pity as I looked at her pinched face, which under other circumstances might have been attractive—even pretty.

“Yes, Monsieur,” she said again. Still she did not move, but stood looking wistfully up into my face.

“What is it, my dear?” I asked, stooping down beside her.

She hesitated a moment, looked down at the pavement, and then slowly raised her eyes again to mine.

“I think—I should like you—very much, Monsieur,” she stammered, and turned away into the street. I gazed after her in amazement, for I could have sworn that she had blushed. I watched her until she was out of sight, and then continued on my way, pondering over this new wonder, until I plunged into the fetid quarter near the Halles, and found plenty there to occupy my mind.

In an hour’s time my heart was sick of the task. The tottering buildings, the filthy streets, the sore-eyed, half-naked children swarming with vermin; the hideous creatures who had once been men and women, but who now were merely monsters disguised in forms scarce human; the sickening, pene-

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trating stench which hung over everything; the squalor, disease, corruption, vice, which were evident on every hand—all these filled me with disgust and dismay, for I, reared under the trees and the blue sky, had never dreamed of anything so terrible, and I trembled at the thought that perhaps in one of those filthy holes, reeking with crime and disease, Nanette—my Nanette, dainty, beautiful, innocent—might be concealed. The thought turned my heart sick within me, and I pushed on from street to street, looking to right and left, mad with horror and despair.

My brain was reeling as I made my way back to the river's edge for a breath of pure air and a glimpse of God's blue sky unsullied by the miasma of disease and filth. Then I turned again to my work, peering into reeking courts, along foul alleys, under noisome doorways, my hand always on my sword, for I detected everywhere black looks and threatening gestures which would have meant death had I been unprepared. But nowhere did I catch a glimpse of Mère Fouchon, and at last, sick at heart, and with every organ of my body in revolt, I turned away and went slowly back to the Rue du Chantre.

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As I entered the court, I saw the concierge beckoning to me eagerly from his box, and I hastened to him.

"What is it?" I asked. "You have something to tell me?"

"Yes, Monsieur," he answered, with a smile. "You were asking this morning about my predecessor."

"Well, what then?" and I endeavored to control my impatience.

"She sent this morning for some clothing she had left behind."

"Yes, yes. Go on."

"She sent a girl, a gamine, only so high, all rags, all dirt, a horrible sight."

"Make haste!" I cried. "What then?"

"Well, I gave this girl the clothes, Monsieur. She took them and went away."

"And is that all?" I asked, my heart falling again.

"Not quite, Monsieur. It happened that my grandson was here at the time, and I told him to follow the girl, believing that in this way we might learn where her mistress is hiding."

"Splendid!" I cried. "And he followed her?"

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"Yes, he followed her, Monsieur—ah, such a distance! Along the Rue des Poulies to the river, along the quays, across the Pont Neuf, through the Rue de la Pelleterie, again along the quays, across the Rue St. Croix, through the Rue Cocatrix, doubling back and forth like a rabbit, doubtless to render pursuit impossible, until finally she turned into the Rue du Chevet. When my grandson reached the corner she had disappeared."

"'Twas well done!" I cried. "Here is a crown for your grandson, who is a brave boy," and I turned away.

"Where do you go, Monsieur? asked the concierge.

"To the Rue du Chevet, to be sure," I answered. "Depend upon it, I shall soon find her hiding-place."

"Have a care, Monsieur," he protested. "'Tis a dangerous place for honest men."

"I have my sword," I answered, and hurried into the street.

Darkness had already come, but I traversed the quays and crossed the Pont Neuf, with its queer little semicircular shops, its dentists and quack doctors and its equestrian statue of our great Henri,

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without pausing for breath. It was only when I plunged into the maze of streets beyond that I was compelled to stop and inquire my way, and even then it was with the greatest difficulty that I found the Rue du Chevet.

I should have given up the task as hopeless, but the thought of Nanette a captive, suffering I knew not what indignities, spurred me on. The quarter was plunged in absolute darkness, there being no pretence of lighting the streets, and I could not see two paces before me, but from the stench which assailed my nostrils—the vapor of crime and disease—I knew I was again in one of those filthy quarters of the town where I had spent the day.

Shadows passed me, leaving behind an impression of incredible foulness. Strange shapes brushed against me. There was something terrible and threatening in the very atmosphere. I felt that, although I could see nothing, I was fully visible to these denizens of the night, whose eyes had grown accustomed to its blackness. Here and there a feeble ray of light penetrated the shutters of a window or fought its way through a crevice in a doorway and faintly illumined a few inches of the dirty pavement. Everywhere else was gloom, so thick,

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so heavy, so absolute, that it seemed to press upon and suffocate me.

I put my hand to my face and found my forehead damp with perspiration.

"Come," I said, "this will not do. You are frightening yourself, my friend. There is really nothing here to fear," and I continued on.

At the end of a moment, I ran against a wall. I felt along it with my hands and found that it completely closed the end of the street. Evidently it was a cul-de-sac and I must retrace my steps. I reflected that it were folly to attempt anything more until daylight came to my assistance, and that the wisest thing for me to do was to return to the Rue du Chantre and secure a good night's rest. Then in the morning, with the help of M. d'Argenson's men, I would soon unearth Mère Fouchon. I shuddered to think that Nanette was condemned to spend a second night in such a place, but plainly I was powerless to prevent it.

As I turned away from the wall, I seemed to hear the sound of many feet shuffling along the pavement, of many voices whispering together. A thousand eyes seemed glaring at me through the darkness. There was something inexpressibly chill-

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ing and menacing in this murmur, which continually receded as I advanced, only to close in behind me. I felt that I had but to stretch out my hand to touch a wall of living bodies, and yet I dared not do so.

Suddenly a door right beside me was thrown open and a flood of light poured out into the street. For a moment I was blinded, and then, framed in the doorway, I saw the shrivelled form and leering face of Mère Fouchon.

"Oh, oh!" she cried, in a shrill voice, "so it is M. le Moyne—the chivalrous M. le Moyne, who prefers a bed on the floor to his own couch when a pretty girl occupies it!"

My sword was out of its sheath in a breath.

"Hellcat!" I cried, and sprang towards her.

She vanished from the doorway like a shadow, but I was after her. Even as I passed the threshold, I heard a clear, piercing cry.

"Pierre!" screamed the voice. "Oh, Pierre! This way!"

"Nanette!" I cried. "Nanette! In a moment, my darling!" and I hurled myself across the room and down the hallway whence the cry seemed to come.

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In that instant, I saw a huge shadow quivering on the wall above me and before I could turn, a crushing blow fell upon my head. There was a burst of flame before my eyes, my sword slipped from my hand, I felt myself falling, falling, and all was black.

CHAPTER X

MÈRE FOUCHON SCORES

I AWOKE with a great pain in my eyes, and when I raised my hand to my head, I found that my hair was clotted with blood. A weight of iron seemed to burden every limb, and I groaned aloud as I tried to rise, and fell back again, palsied by the agony the movement cost me. I felt the wall behind me, and dragging myself to it with infinite suffering, I propped my back against it and looked about me. I could see nothing, for a veil of impenetrable darkness shut me in, and no single crevice admitted a ray of light. The wall against which I leaned was cold and slimy, and once or twice a drop of water fell upon my head.

How long I sat there I do not know, but finally, by a supreme effort, I got to my knees and then to my feet. Feeling along the wall, I advanced a step, two steps, three. And then something seemed to seize me by the waist and hurl me backward. I lay still for a moment, half-dazed, not understanding what had happened. I put my hands to my

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waist and in an instant I comprehended. Around my waist, just above the hips, an iron band was clamped. At the back of the band was a hasp, through which a chain passed. I ran my hands along the chain. It was perhaps three feet in length, and the other end was fastened to the wall.

I suppose I must have fainted, for I remember nothing more until I was torn from the merciful grasp of sleep by a burning thirst, a thirst which tortured and maddened me. I could feel my throat contracting; my tongue swelling in my throbbing mouth—my blood seemed to be aflame. I scraped my fingers over the reeking wall and sucked them for a bit of moisture. I held my mouth open, upward, in the hope that a drop of water might fall into it. I cursed aloud and jerked at my chain in an agony of desperation. At last, I fell exhausted against the wall, and sank into a troubled sleep, disturbed by hideous dreams.

When I opened my eyes again, I seemed stronger. The pain in my head was less intense, but my throat was still dry and parched and I felt hot and feverish. A chance motion of my hand brought it into contact with something on the floor beside me. I felt it cautiously. It seemed to be a vessel of some

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kind. I placed my fingers within it and found it full of water. With a gasp of thankfulness, I placed it to my lips and drank, trembling at the thought that had I turned in my sleep I might have upset it and spilled its precious contents.

Ah, how I drank! I swallowed in great gulps. I filled my mouth to bursting and allowed the blessed liquid to trickle slowly down my throat. I turned my head from side to side, that every portion of my gullet might be reached. I gloated over it as a miser over his gold, and at last with a sigh of utter content, set down the vessel empty.

The water ran through my veins like wine, and I arose to my feet, strong and invigorated. My eyes had grown somewhat accustomed to the darkness, and I could dimly perceive the wall stretching away on either side. And for the first time, I remembered—the search through the night, the opening of the door, Nanette's scream for help, the shadow on the wall—it flashed through my brain like lightning through a summer sky—I must escape, I must keep cool—and with set teeth I choked back the trembling that would have seized me.

The spasm passed, and with my fingers I carefully examined the iron belt about my waist. It

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was, I judged, three inches wide by half an inch in thickness. The ends, which overlapped, were provided with a series of teeth, which fitted together and were clamped into place by a lock. The ends had been pushed past each other until the belt was fitted close to my waist. I tried to work it down over my hips, but soon perceived that this could not be done. Clearly, if I ever left the place, it would be with the belt about me.

I turned my attention to the hasp at the back. It was heavy and riveted through the belt. I examined the chain link by link, but found none that showed a sign of weakness. A heavy iron ring held it to the wall. How the ring was secured I could not tell, but I exerted all my strength against it and found I could not move it a hair's-breadth. Certainly my captors had overlooked no detail that would tend to make me more secure. What fiendish ingenuity had devised this place of torture!

As I sat down again with a sigh of discouragement, I heard a sharp click as of a spring released, a heavy door creaked back, and a woman appeared carrying a lantern. At a glance I recognized Mère Fouchon. Her face was illumined by a devilish joy as she looked about and saw me sitting there.

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"Ho, ho," she laughed, "can this be the gallant who was going to spit me on his sword only the other morning?"

I did not answer, and she placed her lantern on the ground and sat down on a heap of dirt opposite me, but well out of reach, and rocked herself back and forth, and chuckled. I felt myself choking with rage.

"And the girl, too," she continued, after a moment, "the girl with the dark eyes and little red mouth. She is called Nanette, is she not? What a shame that she should be crying her eyes out in the room just overhead!"

I ground my teeth together at the thought of my own impotence.

"Ah, curse!" she cried, "curse your heart out! Christ, how it gladdens my soul! Ho, ho!" and she rocked back and forth in a paroxysm of mirth.

"Come," I said at last, mastering my anger as best I could. "Why are you doing all this?"

"For money," she answered gayly. "Ten thousand crowns, at the very least, Monsieur. It is a pretty sum, is it not?"

"Very pretty," I said. "Who is fool enough to part with it?"

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"Who but M. Jacques Ribaut, of the Rue des Moulins?" and the hag laughed more than ever.

"Ribaut?" I murmured, a great fear at my heart.

"Assuredly, Ribaut," and she leered at me horribly. "Perhaps M. Jean Briquet may pay a portion of it. 'Tis worth it to get such a bride, do you not think so, Monsieur?—such a sweet bride, so soft, so young, so innocent—a jewel of a bride!"

"A bride?" I groaned. "Speak out, woman, and tell me what you mean."

I thought she would choke with laughing.

"In two words, Monsieur," she gasped, so soon as she had regained her breath. "When once the terms are settled, which will be to-morrow, or perhaps even yet to-day, the girl will be delivered to her anxious and loving uncle, none the worse for her little visit here, where she is quite as safe as in your bed in the Rue du Chantre," and she paused again to catch her breath. "A day or two after that, M. Briquet will have the honor of leading her to the altar, whither, since she believes you dead, she will accompany him without resistance. And what a bride she will make—so plump, so warm, so rosy, so adorable! Ah, how I envy that happy

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man!" and she smacked her lips, like a glutton over a choice morsel.

I was pacing up and down the wall. I tore at my chain. In that moment, I would have sold my soul to get my fingers about her neck—scraggy, yellow, seamed—God, how I would have twisted it!

"You hag!" I said between my teeth. "You shall burn in hell for this. Pray God it may be I who send you there!"

She was screaming with laughter.

"Oh, oh," she gasped, "that I should have lived to see this! And he was going to kill me with that sword of his!"

Again she was forced to stop, and sat for some minutes rocking back and forth, shaking with laughter.

I glared at her and cursed her. If there be merit in curses that come from the very bottom of the soul, then is she damned eternally.

CHAPTER XI

TORTURE

BUT this devil did not heed my curses. Perhaps she knew herself damned already, and so feared God nor man. So, seeing her squatting laughing there, my wrath choked itself out, and I stood silent, hot with hate.

"Go on, Monsieur," she screamed. "Do not stop, I beg of you. Oh, the delight of this moment!"

I bit my lips to keep them silent. That I, Pierre le Moyne, should be here, a dupe, a gull, a puppet, a fool, a make-sport for this creature!

"It is sublime," she gasped, "this jest! Everything has played into my hands so nicely, and at last it is to be my turn. I have waited fifteen years for my turn, Monsieur, and now it has come. I think I shall tell you. It is too good to keep to myself; and then, too, I know the secret will be as safe with you as in the tomb," and she paused to laugh again. "Those two creatures of d'Argenson

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endeavored to learn something about me, I'll wager."

"Yes," I said, "but they found very little."

"Mère Fouchon knows how to cover her steps," and the woman chuckled grimly. "The gendarmerie think themselves very acute, but there are others who are sharper. How could they suspect that Mère Fouchon, twenty years ago, was Madame Basarge, housekeeper for M. and Mme. Charles Ribaut, and their brother, that very respectable M. Jacques Ribaut, whom we both love so dearly?"

She saw my look of dazed astonishment, and smiled again, still more grimly.

"It seems you do not understand," she continued after a moment, during which she seemed to be debating how much she should tell me. Caution warned her to be silent; but the spirit of bravado held her in its grip; a silence of many years clamored to be broken; the devil in her urged her on, not to be denied. "After all," she said, "what harm in talking to a dead man? Listen attentively, then, Monsieur. It was sixteen years ago, while I was employed in the Ribaut household, that Madame Ribaut gave birth to a girl—that adorable

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Nanette whom you already know. The mother died a week later, and the father soon followed her. He was a good man, and so adored his wife that he found life not worth living without her—just the opposite of most men! Ah, I remember her so well—picture to yourself, Monsieur, a woman twice as beautiful as this Nanette and with a soul like the Virgin's—well, that would be she. I have never seen another like her—if she had lived, there might, perhaps, have been another story to tell.”

She paused for a moment, and I gazed at her astounded. Her mouth was working and her fingers clutching at the bosom of her dress—could it be, after all, that this hell-hag had a heart? But she caught my eyes and threw her emotion from her.

“But she did not live,” she said, with an ugly laugh. “I am what I am—there is no going back. Let me get on with the story. Charles Ribaut was a good man, but his brother, Jacques—well, that they could have been moulded in the same womb was a miracle—they were like black and white, like night and day, like hell and heaven. His brother was left to take care of the baby and to look after her fortune for her—for her father was rich, oh,

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tremendously rich. She was sent off to a convent for the good sisters to care for. The name on the sign in front of the shop in the Rue des Moulins was altered from Charles Ribaut to Jacques Ribaut. I was discharged, for it seems that he did not wish to have any one near him who had known his brother. In ten years no one remembered that such a man as Charles Ribaut had ever existed. His brother was still taking care of his fortune, and as the moment drew near when he knew he must part with it, the thought came to him, why part with it at all? Clearly, there was only one thing which could disturb his possession—that was the girl's marriage. Her husband would, of course, demand an accounting of her affairs."

She paused for a moment and looked at me.

"Yes," I nodded. "I begin to see."

"You will understand, then," she continued, "that it was necessary for Ribaut to find for the girl a husband who would not be too curious—who would be satisfied with a dowry of twenty or thirty thousand crowns and who would ask no questions. Such a husband was found in the person of a certain M. Jean Briquet."

I shuddered as I recalled that hideous face.

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"I see you know him," she chuckled. "He is beautiful, is he not?"

"But how do you know all this?" I asked.

She hesitated for a moment—but the temptation was too strong. And, after all, what harm in talking to a dead man?

"You have perhaps noticed, Monsieur," she said at last, "that I do not speak the argot of the sewers, and yet for ten years I was a part of them. After leaving Ribaut, I made a mistake, a false step—no matter what. It was necessary for me to remain concealed from the police. I was no longer Mme. Basarge. I became Mère Fouchon, a consort of thieves and drabs—a receiver of stolen goods—a thing of the night. Do you fancy I relished it, Monsieur? At the end of ten years, I thought it safe to emerge from the darkness. I became concierge of the house in the Rue du Chantre, and dreamed of a day when I might regain my old place in the world. I had been in hell, but I fancied I could drag myself out."

Again she paused, and I looked at her with something like pity in my heart. I could see what those ten years in the sewers of Paris had done for her. D'Argenson's theory, then, had been correct.

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"It was at that time I thought of applying to M. Ribaut," she continued. "I thought perhaps he might be willing to assist me. I did not then suspect what a dog he was. But he raved at me like a madman, and threatened to denounce me to the police should I ever again appear before him. I began to suspect something. I made inquiries, but I could find out nothing. His niece, they said, was at the Sacré Cœur getting her education. Had she been home? No, no one had ever seen her. But I saw her—the scrub-woman at the convent pointed her out to me. Indeed, I did not need to have her pointed out—she was so like her mother, I thought for a moment I was looking at a ghost, and grew quite faint. But it passed, and I looked at her well and saw she was not happy. What girl could be in that gray, cold, silent place? Ugh, it makes me shiver to think of it! Even the sewers were better, for, after all, there is life in the sewers, not always and always silence! But I did not rest there. I made a friend of a concierge just across from the Ribaut house, but she could tell me nothing. Was the girl coming home? She did not know. Had she been betrothed? Well, there was a rumor that she was destined for a certain M. Briquet, a great

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friend of her uncle's. Then in a flash I understood, Monsieur, for I had known M. Briquet, having met him during those ten years spent in the darkness," and she laughed harshly. "His is not a pleasant character, though he has raised himself out of the abyss."

I said nothing, fearing to interrupt this remarkable story.

"But though I knew everything," she went on after a moment, "I could do nothing, as I had no wish to make the acquaintance of M. d'Argenson's men. It was not until I saw you enter the court of the Epée Flamboyante with Mlle. Ribaut on your arm that I found a plan. Now, M. le Moyne, my plan is working admirably. I hold the key to the situation. In a day or two, Ribaut will come to terms. I will take my ten thousand crowns and pouf!—there will no longer be a Mère Fouchon. I will go to Marseilles, Bordeaux, Nice—anywhere away from this execrable Paris. I shall have money—I shall live well—I shall no longer fear the police or a return to the life of the Rue des Marmosets. I shall escape from hell, after all."

"And what do you propose doing with me?" I asked.

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She looked at me a moment with glittering eyes, all her venom in her face.

"Ah, you, M. le Moyne. It is most unfortunate for you that you did not remain contentedly in the Rue du Chantre instead of following the girl here. You have put your head in the trap, and in the trap you stay. Out of it, you would trouble me. You are too intimate with M. d'Argenson. So, when I am ready to leave Paris, I shall close the outer door, swing into place a certain slab of stone, and go away. That will be the end. A century from now, perhaps, workmen will find a cavern under the street. In the cavern will be a skeleton chained to the wall. They can wonder as they please, but I'll wager they'll not guess the story. Perhaps some one will make a very pretty romance of it. Think what an honor, Monsieur! The hero of a romance!"

Honor! Ah, well, this devil should not see I feared her. Besides, was not the lieutenant of police my friend? He would learn from the concierge whither I had gone. Doubtless he was already searching for me.

So I laughed in her face.

"You deceive yourself, Madame," I said. "I

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have friends who know that I came here. They will turn this whole quarter upside down but they find me, and then you will be sent to ornament a gibbet at Bicetre."

She rocked back and forth, clasping her knees and leering into my face.

"Find you?" she echoed. "Not soon, Monsieur; certainly not in time to save you, unless the earth opens. The police have been this way, and they have passed without finding a trace of you or of me. You would never have discovered me, never have found a trace of me, had I not opened the door that you might walk in. I saw my chance to be revenged—and revenge is very sweet—so I opened the trap and in you came! For you had not behaved nicely to me, Monsieur; you had looked at me in a way that any woman would resent; you had spoken words to me that were not to be forgiven. Well, you are in the trap, and you will never get out. Do you fancy I would have taken the risk of sending for that clothing had I not been certain I could laugh at the police?"

She paused for breath. Now that the gates were opened, that silence of fifteen years was being broken with a vengeance!

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"Nevertheless, they will find me," I repeated resolutely. "You do not know Monsieur d'Argenson."

"Do I not!" and she laughed horribly, with contorted face. "For fifteen years has he been seeking me, yet he has never found me. Nor will he ever find you, for you are well hidden, Monsieur; so well that Christ may not find you at Judgment. That would be horrible—not to get your reward for sleeping on the hard floor the other night, and leaving that pretty girl to go, pucelle, to our friend, Bri——"

But she did not finish, for, mad with rage, I caught from the floor the vessel that had held the water, and dashed it full at her face. But quick as a flash, she bent aside, and the dish crashed against the wall behind her.

She sat for a moment looking at me, a queer light in her eyes.

"You love her, do you not, Monsieur?" she said quietly, at last. "Too bad your fate should bring you here, for there is no way out."

No way out! There was a finality in her tone that chilled me. I sat down again trembling, against the wall.

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"I bought the secret of this place at a price"—she paused, and her features became frightful, "at a price of body and soul," she continued, hoarsely. "I had to have it—to save my life—I did not hesitate. Now, it is serving me once more, Monsieur. When I leave it to-morrow, for the last time, it will never again be opened."

I felt myself gazing, fascinated, over the edge of an abyss.

"It is a very interesting place," she went on, sneeringly. "The man of whom I—bought it—had been a scholar before he became a brute—I think it is your men of genius who fall the lowest when they fall—and he told me about it one day. He said that at one time this little island was all Paris, and that this cavern was hewn in the rock by some tyrant who ruled here then—a queer name he had—I have forgotten. Its very existence had been unknown for I know not how many centuries, until this beast I tell you of chanced upon the secret of the entrance there. A hundred men have eaten their hearts out, bound in that belt, sitting just where you are sitting."

I shuddered at the thought. I felt that my blood was chilled, that my manhood was slipping from me.

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"You will leave me here to starve, then?" I asked at last.

"No, I will be merciful, Monsieur," she answered. "I have no wish to torture you. I am, in a way, sorry for you. Before I go I will place by your side a cup of wine. You will drink the wine, and you will fall into a pleasant sleep from which you will never awaken."

"Oh, you fiend!" I groaned, sick at the thought. "You fiend!"

"I think you understand the situation now," and she laughed harshly as she arose to go. "Do you suppose for a moment that I will allow the life of one man or of twenty men to stand between me and success? Do you suppose I would go back to the Rue des Marmosets—to the life that was a living hell—for anything on earth? I was so sure that you must die—that I could not with safety spare you, even if I so desired—that I have thrown into the Seine the key of the lock at your belt. That belt is there to stay, Monsieur, until it rots away."

She picked up her lantern and took a step towards the door.

"I will tell you one thing more, Monsieur," she added, pausing, "that you may guess what my life

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has been. The drink which I will give you is one that I have kept by me for fifteen years. I preferred that death to the wheel—yes, a thousand times. But I shall no longer have need of it, Monsieur, so I give it to you. You see that I am generous.”

She laughed again, and in a moment the door swung shut behind her and I was left alone in the darkness.

CHAPTER XII

A CHILD OF THE NIGHT

I SAT for a long time, dazed and desperate, my head in my hands, my heart cold within me. It seemed that the last shred of my courage had been stripped from me. I was never again to see the trees nor the blue sky, or bare my head to the good sunshine. I was never again to lie in the grass and gaze up, up, through the heavens at the bright stars. I was never again to feel on my face the sweet breath of the south wind. I thought of the deep, placid Midouze, of the wide fields, of the dark forest, with the wild-flowers nestling in its depths. I thought of my mother, of my sister, of Nanette—I was never again to see Nanette—to hold her hand—to gaze into her eyes—she was to become prey to a monstrous appetite—ah, Christ!—my very soul trembled within me. She had called me—in terror and despair, she had called me—and I had not come! Instead, I had rushed headlong into this trap. I had played the fool! If

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I, alone, were to suffer I might endure it, but that she should suffer too——

But the mood passed, the throbbing in my brain subsided, stark fear hid its face. I shook myself together. After all, I was not yet dead, and so might yet escape. Still, the more I pondered the situation, the more remote did any chance of escape appear. I saw no way of accomplishing even the first step towards freedom, that of loosening myself from the chain which held me to the wall, and even were that done, I dared not think of the difficulties I must still encounter before I should be free. And yet I could not believe it was to be my fate to die here, chained to the wall, like a rat in a trap.

I heard the door opening again, and I stared in amazement at the queer figure that entered, carrying in one hand a candle and in the other a plate of food. It was a girl with legs grotesquely bowed, and in an instant I recognized the child I had rescued on the Quai des Théatins. At the same moment, the light from the candle fell upon my face, and she knew me.

“You!” she cried. “You! Oh, my God!” and she let fall the candle and plate upon the floor, her legs seemed to give way beneath her, and she sat

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rocking herself helplessly, despair writ large upon her face.

I stared at her a moment astounded, understanding nothing of her emotion. Then the words she had uttered, blushing, on the quay, came back to me—words called forth, perhaps, by the first touch of kindness she had ever known——

“I think—I should like you—very much, Monsieur!”

I looked at her again, and a ray of hope came to me. Perhaps in this unfortunate creature I might find an ally.

“Come,” I said, “this is not the way to help me, to spill my supper. I assure you, Mademoiselle, that I am very hungry.”

She gathered up the bread and meat without a word and gave them to me. I went at them vigorously and without minding the fact that some particles of dirt from the floor still clung to them. She set the candle upright beside her and watched me with eyes dark with apprehension. As I looked at her a thought suddenly occurred to me.

“Was it you,” I asked, “who went to the house in the Rue du Chantre to get Mère Fouchon’s clothing?”

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"Yes, Monsieur," she said.

"And you were on your way there when I picked you up on the quay?"

"Yes, Monsieur."

I smiled grimly as I reflected on the extraordinary chance which had taken me there just in time to save her life.

Suddenly she burst into a flood of tears.

"Oh, you smile!" she sobbed. "You do not understand, then. You do not know that you are to be left here, after we are gone, and that no one will ever find you."

"Oh, yes, I have been told so," I answered, "but I do not believe it."

She raised her head and looked at me fixedly.

"You mean you will escape?" she asked, after a moment.

I nodded and smiled again.

"Oh, but you do not know," she cried. "A man could not escape from here if he had the strength of a hundred men."

"Nevertheless," I began, but the hoarse voice of Mère Fouchon interrupted me.

"La Bancale," she cried, "come here at once, and be sure to bolt the door after you."

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"I must go," she said. "I will do what I can, Monsieur."

I watched her as she went. So she was called La Bancale, the bandy-legged, and my eyes were wet with tears as I thought of what her life had been—of what it yet must be. She would do all she could, she had said, and yet what could she accomplish? She was so frail, so weak. Still, for a moment, I felt more hopeful. To a drowning man, even a straw is welcome. Besides, she was not without her shrewdness—witness how she had doubled on her tracks to prevent pursuit, and had finally evaded her pursuer. Or was it really a trap that had been set for me, and into which I had walked blindly?

The problem was too great a one for my wit to solve, for my head was paining me again severely. It was no light blow that had been given me, and I wondered that it had not crushed my skull. I could feel that the blood had soaked through my hair and dried about my face, but I had no way of removing it. The air of the cellar seemed foul and close; I was shivering with the cold and damp. At last, in sheer exhaustion, my head fell forward and I slept.

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A touch on the arm awakened me. I opened my eyes, but could see nothing.

"Are you here, Monsieur?" a voice whispered. "Speak to me."

"I was asleep," I said. "Is it thou, La Bancalé?"

"Oh, do not call me by that hideous name," she sobbed.

"What shall I call you, then, my dear?"

"Anything, anything you like, Monsieur, only not that."

"But have you no other name? Surely, you were not always called that!"

"Always, Monsieur," she sobbed. "Ever since I can remember."

Poor child! And she might have been a girl, happy like any other!

"Let me see," I said, "I will call you Ninon. I have a sister named Ninon. I am sure you would love her."

"I am sure of it also, if she is your sister, Monsieur," she answered softly.

"How does it happen that you are here?" I asked, vaguely troubled by the tone of her voice.

"Where is Mère Fouchon?"

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"She went away just now, and as she said she was going to the Rue des Moulins she cannot be back for an hour at least."

"To the Rue des Moulins?" I cried. "Oh, I must escape!" and I sprang to my feet and tugged at my chain in an ecstasy of rage. "Ninon," I said suddenly, "could you not step into the street and say two words to a gendarme about my being here?"

"Alas, Monsieur," she answered, "I am as much a prisoner as yourself. Mère Fouchon always locks me in when she leaves the house."

I groaned aloud and could hear her sobbing.

"Come," I said, mastering myself at the end of a moment, "this will not do. We must be brave. Cease crying, Ninon, and sit here beside me."

She did as I bade, and as I passed my arm about her and drew her to me, I felt her body trembling and shaken by sobs. My lips quivered with pity as I perceived how thin she was.

"Now," I said, "we are comfortable. Place your head against my shoulder—so. How old are you, Ninon?"

"I do not know, Monsieur."

"Pierre is my name," I said.

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"I do not know how old I am, M. Pierre," and it seemed to me that her voice dwelt lovingly on the word.

"And is Mère Fouchon your mother?"

"I do not know that, either, M. Pierre. Only ——" and she hesitated.

"Only what, Ninon? Tell me; do not be afraid."

"Only I hope that she is not my mother, because I hate her."

"She has not been kind to you then, Ninon?"

"Kind to me!" and I felt her shudder. "Ah, if you knew, Monsieur! The beatings—the nights and days spent here in this cavern—sometimes I thought she would kill me. If she were my mother, she would not hate me so, would she, Monsieur?"

I held her closer to me with aching heart.

"No, she would not hate you if she were your mother, Ninon; she would love you. I am sure she is not your mother. Have you always lived here?"

"Always, Monsieur. After she became concierge, I remained here, and she came home every night."

"She did not sleep at the Rue du Chantre, then?"

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"No, never, Monsieur. Always here."

I smiled grimly to myself at this proof that the hag had been lying to me on the night she tripped over my legs in the hallway.

"And she has never told you anything about yourself?" I continued after a moment.

"Never, Monsieur."

"But you have asked her to tell you, have you not, Ninon?"

"Oh, yes, Monsieur, many times."

"And how did she answer?"

"With a beating, M. Pierre."

I drew her closer to me and gathered both her hands into my own.

"Perhaps it will not be always so," I said gently.

"Perhaps some day there will be people who will love you and who will try to make you happy."

She was sobbing against my shoulder, her hands clutching at me nervously.

"You would go with me, Ninon, would you not," I asked, "if I escaped from here?"

"Oh, yes, M. Pierre," she sobbed. "I would go with you anywhere."

"That is right," I said, and I bent and kissed her forehead. "But first, I must escape, and in

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order to **escape**, I must be rid of this chain. Do you think you could find me a file, Ninon?"

"A file? I do not know, Monsieur. I will try. But I must go. She will soon be returning," and she drew herself away. "If I can find a file, I will bring it to you, M. Pierre," and a moment later, I heard the door close behind her.

CHAPTER XIII

A NIGHT OF AGONY

I SAT for a long time pondering over the unhappy fate of this child. What her story had been I could only guess. Stolen, doubtless, by this devil in whose care she was—brought up, certainly, in the midst of filth and shame; stunted, tortured, misshapen—until she had become a mere fungus of humanity, growing only in the dark, without blood or healthy vigor—a hideous travesty upon girlhood and womanhood. The horror and sadness of the thing moved me strangely—yet had I not seen a thousand such during those hours I had spent in the slums?

But Ninon—would she bear transplanting into other soil? I doubted it, yet it seemed to me that death itself were preferable a thousand times to such a life as this. At least, God willing, I would make the trial.

So the hours dragged on. Sometimes I dozed; more often I sat plunged in gloomy thought, trying in vain to work out the problem of escape. At

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last the door opened again, and Ninon brought me another plate of meat and a can of water.

"I know where there is a file, M. Pierre," she whispered, as she set them down. "I will try to get it when Mère Fouchon goes out again."

I pressed her hand for answer, and was glad that I had said nothing, for at that moment the woman herself appeared at the door with her lantern. She motioned the girl to leave, and herself sat down on the dirt-heap opposite me.

I looked at her with astonishment, for her eyes were gleaming and her withered face was distorted with a malignant joy.

"Well, Monsieur," she said after a moment, "it seems that I must take leave of you sooner than I had thought."

"And why?" I asked, with a sinking heart.

"My business is finished," she answered. "Ribaut was more reasonable than I had hoped. I regret that I did not ask for twenty thousand crowns instead of ten. Ah, there was a pretty scene! You should have seen him—you who love him no more than I. It warmed my heart. He raved; he swore. He foamed at the mouth, his face grew purple, just as though he were about to have a fit. But he

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calmed down when he found me inexorable. The girl was cheap at the price, and he knew it. So we soon came to terms."

"He has paid you the money, then?"

"He will do so in the morning."

"And you have given him back his niece?"

She laughed harshly.

"What do you take me for, Monsieur?" she asked. "A fool? No, no. M. Ribaut will get his niece ten minutes after he has given me the money!"

I could find nothing to say, but sat looking at her in dazed bewilderment and despair.

"It is all arranged," she continued. "At six o'clock I am to receive ten thousand crowns, in return for which I turn over to him this pretty Nannette. Then I say good-by to Paris and to Mère Fouchon. Ah, do not fear; I shall not forget you, Monsieur. I have the dose here," and she drew a little vial from the bosom of her dress. "When the door has closed for the last time, Monsieur, I should advise you to drink it at once. It is the easiest way, much pleasanter than starving."

Still I said nothing.

"Ah, I forgot one thing," she added, pausing as she turned to go. "At nine o'clock to-morrow

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morning at the church of St. Landry there will be a ceremony, Monsieur—such a charming ceremony. Can you not guess what? Well, I will tell you. At this ceremony, that pretty little Nanette, whom you love so much, will be transformed into Mme. Jean Briquet.”

I dashed at her with an oath, but the chain jerked me back against the wall. She stood for a moment and laughed at me.

“ You see now, Monsieur, do you not, how much wiser it will be to drain that little vial without delay? Suppose you play the coward—suppose you are alive at nine o’clock—you here in this hole, looking death in the face—this enchanting Nanette before the altar looking into the face of her husband! Bah!” and she made a sudden grimace. “ I think I should prefer your part, Monsieur. Death itself must be less hideous than Jean Briquet. All the same,” she added, “ you will do well to drink with a steady hand—you will find it a pleasant death—a dropping to sleep, sweet dreams, and then—darkness. I know. I have seen others, happy, smiling, sink into the abyss. I will have La Bancale give it to you in the morning,” and she was gone.

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I sank down against the wall, dazed at this new stroke of fortune. Give me a day, two days, and escape might be possible—but the bargain had been made; in a few hours it would be too late.

How long I lay there in a half-stupor I do not know, but at last I heard the door open again and Ninon's voice whispering my name. I groaned for reply.

"Oh, M. Pierre," she whispered, bending over me, "I have the file. Here is the file."

"The file!" I cried. "Oh, give it me, Ninon! There is not a moment to lose."

She placed her trembling hand in mine and gave me the file. I ran my fingers over it. It was old, rusty, dull—but it had been a good file, once; doubtless part of some long-dead burglar's kit—would it do the work? In an agony of haste I ran my hand along the chain until I found what seemed the weakest link, and set to work upon it. At the end of a few minutes I found I had made a scratch in the iron, and hope began to revive in my heart. The sound of sobbing startled me.

"Is it you, Ninon?" I whispered. "Forgive me, my dear; I had forgot to thank you."

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"Oh, it is not that, M. Pierre," she sobbed. "It is not that!"

"Here, sit beside me," I said. "Let me put my arm around you—so. Now, tell me what it is."

She was silent a moment, and I could feel her little body quivering.

"Oh, M. Pierre," she whispered at last, "I heard all that Mère Fouchon said this afternoon," and I raised my hand to her face to find it wet with tears.

"Well," I said, "what then, Ninon?"

"And do you love her so very much, this Nannette?"

"Yes, very much, Ninon."

"Enough to die for her, perhaps?"

"Oh, yes," I answered. "To die for her were nothing, Ninon."

"That is right, M. Pierre," she whispered, and her voice was shaking. "That is the way to love. I have seen her. She is pretty, oh, so pretty, even though her eyes were red with weeping. Tell me, M. Pierre, must one be pretty to be loved?"

"Oh, no, Ninon," I said. "One needs only to be good. You are good, Ninon, and there will be

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somebody some day who will love you and who will make you happy.

She said nothing for a moment, as though pondering this answer.

"No, there never will be any one, M. Pierre," she said at last, with a little sigh. "But this Nannette—ah, she is adorable. She heard your voice when you came in that night, calling her name. She thinks you dead, M. Pierre. They have told her that you are dead, that you were killed that night. I believe she loves you also, she has wept so much."

"Oh, if I am only in time," I said, trembling with apprehension, and I picked up my chain again.

"Yes, I will go," said the girl; and then, "will you do something for me, M. Pierre?"

"You have only to name it, Ninon."

"Kiss me good-by, Monsieur, You may not have time in the morning."

"But I am coming back for you, Ninon," I cried. "It is not good-by. You are to live with us always."

"No, no," and she was sobbing again. "That cannot be. I am not of your world, Monsieur. I

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am of the darkness. I could not bear the light. I am hideous, Monsieur—I know it.”

“Come here, Ninon,” I whispered. “I will kiss you good-night, not good-by. You shall be pretty, Ninon, when you live surrounded by our love, as you are going to live.”

She pressed her lips to mine, and then went away, still sobbing softly. As the door closed, I set to work again at my chain, knowing that no sound I might make could penetrate those massive walls. The hours passed, my hands were torn and bleeding, but still I urged the file back and forth across the iron. The cut in the link was slowly growing deeper—but, oh, so slowly. At last it was almost through, and I paused from sheer exhaustion. My brain was reeling and my hands were shaking like those of a man with palsy. I laid my head back against the wall and closed my eyes. Tired nature conquered and I fell asleep.

“Oh, M. Pierre,” cried a voice in my ear, “you have slept!”

I opened my eyes with a start. It was Ninon, this time with a lantern.

“You have slept!” she cried again. “You have

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not severed the chain. It is morning, and you will be too late!"

"Too late, yes, too late!" I cried. "And all because of my accursed weakness!" and I picked up my chain and tore at it like a madman.

"She has gone away," cried Ninon. "She said she would be back in an hour. She took Nanette with her. When she returns we are to leave Paris."

I groaned. My hands were trembling so I could not control them. I tried to pick up the file and found that I could not hold it.

"It is too late," I groaned. "Did she tell you to give me a vial, Ninon?"

"Yes, yes," she cried. "Here it is," and she held it up.

"Give it to me," I said, and reached for it.

"What is it, M. Pierre?" she asked, springing back, her eyes large with terror.

"No matter," I answered. "Give it me, Ninon. It is the easiest way."

"No, no! Be a man, Monsieur! Oh, you are a man—such a brave man!" and she raised the vial and dashed it against the wall. It broke with a little crash. The liquid trickled down over the

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stones and filled the cell with a pleasant, sweetish odor.

"Give me the file," she said, and took it from my palsied hand. "Do not despair, Monsieur, there is yet time," and she was filing away at the chain with all her little strength. "Oh, I was wrong to say you slept. See, it is almost through. In half an hour it will be quite through, and you will be free."

Back and forth the file went. I watched her stupidly, and saw without understanding it that her hands turned red and that the chain was wet with blood.

"Think of Nanette, M. Pierre," she said, looking up for a moment into my eyes. "Think of Nanette, that dear Nanette, whom you are going to rescue presently—whom you are going to make so happy."

I was sobbing wildly, out of sheer weakness.

"Hasten!" I whispered. "Oh, hasten, Ninon!"

She sprang to her feet with a little cry of triumph.

"It is done!" she cried. "The chain is through. Take hold here, Monsieur. Now pull. Pull with all your might. Ah!"

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The chain was broken. I staggered towards the outer door like a drunken man.

"Free!" I muttered to myself. "Free!" and I reeled through the door into the outer room.

Ninon was beside me, her finger on her lips, her face white with fear.

"Hush," she whispered. "I hear footsteps. She is returning. Perhaps there are others with her. In here, quick," and before I could resist, even if in my great weakness I had thought of resistance, she pushed me into a little closet, just as Mère Fouchon unlocked the outer door and entered.

CHAPTER XIV

GREATER LOVE THAN MINE

I LEANED against the wall of the little closet in which I was, and looked out through the half-opened door into the room. I saw that Mère Fouchon carried in her arms a leathern bag, which she placed upon the table with a sigh of relief at being rid of its weight.

"Come, make ready," she said to the girl, "the wagon will be here in a moment. Did you give our friend the bottle?"

As she turned, she perceived that the door of my cell was open. She sprang to it, cast one look within and saw by the light of the lantern that it was empty.

"He is gone!" she screamed, and turned her glaring eyes and working face upon the girl. "You drab, it was with your help!"

Doubtless in that instant she saw her plans crumbling about her, she felt the meshes of the law tightening, at the end of the path loomed the

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black gibbet. This time she would not escape! Small wonder that the blood leaped to her eyes, as she stood there trembling, strangled by rage, unable to speak!

Then the bonds loosened and she sprung upon the girl like a cat upon its prey.

"Curse you!" she screamed. "You shall pay for it—you!" and she snatched a knife from the table.

In an instant, my strength and manhood came back to me, and I dashed open the door.

"You devil!" I said between my teeth. "You devil!" and I was upon her.

Even as I grasped her hair, she raised the knife and plunged it deep into the girl's breast. I dragged back her head, dashed my fist into her face and threw her against the wall with all my strength. She struck with a dull crash, rebounded to the floor and lay there with closed eyes, the blood oozing from her nose and mouth, her red knife still in her hand.

"Pray heaven, I have killed you!" I said, and stooped and raised Ninon in my arms.

She opened her eyes and gazed at me with a smile of ineffable sweetness.

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"It is better so," she whispered. "I was not of your world, M. Pierre, and now I shall not have to live when you are gone."

The hot tears were on my cheeks as I looked at her, and she raised her hand to my face with a gesture of tenderness inexpressible.

"Are those tears for me?" she asked. "Oh, how glad I am that you care enough to weep! I am not sorry to die. I had never dreamed that I should have the joy of dying in your arms like this, with your dear eyes looking down upon me. And you will soon dry your tears, M. Pierre, when you look upon another face more beautiful—oh, a thousand times more beautiful than mine."

I opened my mouth, but could not speak. I felt her body stiffening in my arms.

"You told me," she whispered, "that you loved her enough to die for her, M. Pierre. But I love you more than that—oh, so much more than that! I love you enough to give you to another, M. Pierre—to die that she may possess you."

She gazed at me a moment longer, then her eyes slowly closed, her lips parted in a sigh that bore her spirit with it. I was sobbing wildly as I laid the little form reverently upon the pallet in one cor-

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ner and turned to go. As I did so I fancied I saw Mère Fouchon move.

"So you are not dead," I said, speaking aloud as though she could hear me. "Well, you shall not escape," and catching her by the arm, I dragged her within the cell and shut the door. As I pushed it into place, I saw that by swinging back two slabs of stone, the door was masked, and the wall of the cellar was apparently unbroken. I trembled as I thought what my fate would have been had Mère Fouchon thrown those stones into place and gone away.

As I turned again into the outer room my eyes fell upon the bag which she had placed on the table. I opened it and was astonished to find it full of gold. I understood in a moment. It was the price Ribaut had paid for Nanette.

"Come," I said, "I will take this with me. It will be proof of my story."

I left the room and found myself at the foot of a flight of stairs which led to a hallway above. Following this, I came to a room which I recognized as that which I had entered sword in hand in pursuit of Mère Fouchon. As I stepped into it, I heard some one knocking at the outer door. I flung

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it open, and saw outside a man who shrank back in alarm as his eyes fell upon me. A cart was standing in the street.

"Ah, it is the driver," I cried. "Come, my friend, you are to take me to the Palais Royal as quickly as possible."

"I came for a woman, not for a madman!" he protested.

"I am no madman," I said. "Come," and I opened my bag and gave him a louis. "This will pay you for your trouble."

"Where is the woman?" he asked.

"She no longer has need of you."

He looked at me a moment with staring eyes.

"Monsieur," he said at last, "a crime has been committed here."

"I do not deny it," I answered, "only it is not I who have committed it. Why, man, I want you to take me to M. d'Argenson at the Palais Royal. Do you think I should go there, if I had committed a crime?"

"To M. d'Argenson?" he repeated. "Ah, ah—that is different. Come, Monsieur, I will take you," and he sprang into his cart. I was beside him ere the words were spoken.

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"Make haste!" I cried, and leaned against the side of the cart, sick with apprehension. If I should be too late!

He whipped his horse into a run and we bumped rapidly along the street and across the river to the quays. Here the crowd delayed us and we could proceed but slowly. At last we reached a side-street and turned into it at a gallop. In a moment we had crossed the Rue St. Honoré and were at the Palais Royal. I sprang from the wagon and up the steps into the ante-chamber just as the clocks were striking eight. I ran straight to the man who stood at the inner door.

"Tell M. d'Argenson that M. le Moyne is here to make his report and that it is important," I panted.

He stared at me a moment in amazement and then disappeared through the door. In an instant he was back.

"You are to enter, Monsieur," he said, and closed the door behind me.

D'Argenson was seated at his table, and he gazed at me in astonishment.

"Good God, M. le Moyne," he cried, "what has happened to you?"

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Not until that moment did I realize the strangeness of my appearance—my hair matted with blood, my clothing torn and filthy, an iron belt around my waist from which dangled a chain a foot long, my doublet red with Ninon's blood. I did not wonder that the carter had believed me a madman, or that he had scented a crime.

Briefly as possible I told my story, d'Argenson listening in silence to the end. As I finished, he struck a bell at his elbow. The usher entered instantly.

"My carriage at once," he said, "and send two men to a house in the Rue du Chevet of which they will see the street door open. They will find an old woman lying in the inner portion of the cellar, and will lodge her at once in the conciergerie."

The man bowed and withdrew. D'Argenson picked up the bag of money which I had placed on the table before him, and after a glance at its contents, threw it into a drawer, which he locked.

"The wedding, you say, is to take place at nine o'clock?" he asked.

"Yes, Monsieur, at the Church of St. Landry."

"Ah, well, we shall be there," and d'Argenson smiled, "and I fancy we shall have a little sur-

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prise for M. Ribaut and M. Briquet. I do not think that Mère Fouchon, or Mme. Basarge, will ever trouble you again, Monsieur. Her hour has struck."

CHAPTER XV

TO THE CHURCH OF ST. LANDRY

THERE was a tone in his voice that made me tremble. I realized that this man could be terrible, inexorable upon occasion. I had good cause to hate the woman, but, God knows, I pitied her now.

"Her hour has struck," repeated d'Argenson. "She has lived fifteen years too long already. She has cheated the gallows, but the gallows will claim its own."

I questioned him with my eyes.

"She called it a mistake, you told me—that was a gentle name for it. I remember it very well, for this mistake was one of the most horrible of the first year of my administration. The police was not organized then as it is now, or she would not have escaped us."

"And what was this mistake, Monsieur?" I questioned.

"It is a pretty story," he said musingly. "There is not time to tell it now as it should be told—but,

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in a word, this woman, after she left Ribaut, secured a place with a pastry-cook named Durand, in the Rue Auxerois. He was wealthy and she seems to have conceived a passion for him. One morning his wife was found dead in bed. He welcomed the release, perhaps, but he did not look twice at Madame Basarge. Instead, he married again, this time a pretty girl from Orleans, which had been his home. One day, the pastry-shop did not open. The neighbors became alarmed and burst in the door. They found Durand and his wife in bed. They had been dead for hours, and their purple flesh proved they had been poisoned. Madame Basarge was missing. So was Durand's little daughter. We found out afterwards that the woman had learned her infamous art from one of the disciples of the Widow Montvoisin."

He paused, and his face grew stern.

"You can conceive, Monsieur, how I searched for that woman. I had just come to the office. I felt personally responsible—my reputation seemed at stake. But we found not a trace of her. She descended into depths from which even the police recoiled. But I have waited. I knew that fate would deliver her to me. I am prepared."

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He turned to a case of papers at his side, and after a moment's search, drew out one, opened it, and glanced over it.

"There was no question of her guilt," he continued, after a moment, "and a decree of death was issued against her. I hold it here in my hand. There need be no further delay in its execution."

He folded the paper again, and sat for a time, tapping it against the table.

"That woman is a genius," he said, at last. "I admire her. She baffled us so completely. Your concierge told my men he had sent you to the Rue du Chevet, and we scoured the quarter from top to bottom, but could find no trace of you. It is not often my men fail, M. le Moyne, but how were they to suspect the existence of a cavern thirty feet underground? I must see it for myself, some day. And the girl—well, we found no trace of the girl, either, nor of Madame Basarge, nor of this gamine you say she had with her—they must have had another hiding-place."

But my brain was busy with another problem.

"You said, M. le Comte," I began, "that a daughter of the confectioner Durand was missing. Was she ever found?"

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"She was never found. Ah, I see," and he looked at me suddenly. "This gamine—how old was she?"

I shook my head.

"I do not know, Monsieur. She might have been fifteen—twenty—twenty-five—she was old enough to love."

"Well," he cried, "I venture the guess that it was Durand's daughter. The woman's object in stealing the child always puzzled me, but now I understand—she wanted some one upon whom she might wreak her hatred."

That was it—in a flash I saw it. Some one upon whom to wreak her hatred—some one to torture! Ah, Ninon, what a fate was yours!

The opening of the door brought me from my thoughts, and I turned to see an attendant enter.

"Your carriage is waiting, M. le Comte," he announced.

"Very well," cried d'Argenson, springing to his feet and seizing his cloak and hat. "I am going with you myself, M. le Moyne, for I am curious to witness this little coup de théâtre. It is not often that I give myself a treat of this kind," and he led the way into the ante-chamber. "Here, Bernin,"

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he called to an officer who was standing there, "you will deliver this order to the jailer of the conciergerie at once," and he handed him the paper containing the sentence of Mère Fouchon. Her hour had struck, indeed! "Come with me, Monsieur," he added to me and led the way rapidly down the steps and to the carriage.

"We have ample time," he said, as the carriage started. "It is yet twenty minutes of nine o'clock. I imagine that these good people whom we are going to surprise will believe they see a ghost when you appear before them," he added, with a smile. "Upon my word, I doubt if even the charming Nanette will know you. You are enough to frighten a woman half to death."

"There was no time," I said, "or I should have changed my garments."

"No, no," cried d'Argenson, "I would not have one speck of dirt less. Believe me, with that bloody head, those torn hands, those filthy clothes, those haggard eyes—and above everything, with that belt of iron about your waist—you are admirable!"

He looked at me in silence for a moment, as the carriage rolled along the Rue St. Honoré.

"M. le Moyne," he said suddenly, "I need not

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tell you we have no proof that there is really a conspiracy between Ribaut and Briquet?"

"No proof, Monsieur?" I stammered, for I had believed the way quite clear.

"No proof whatever," repeated d'Argenson. "Nothing but the suspicions of an old woman, which there is little chance of confirming. There are, of course, many things which point in the same direction—the pertinacity of Ribaut, his willingness to sacrifice ten thousand crowns in order that the marriage might take place, his terror when you threatened a police investigation, the apparent unfitness of Briquet, the hint that he was once a thief or worse—all these indicate that Mère Fouchon's theory is the right one. Still there is no proof. Not a single suspicious circumstance has been unearthed by my agents."

"You will permit the wedding to take place, then?" I cried in despair. "You will do nothing to prevent it?"

"Rest assured, Monsieur," said d'Argenson, kindly, "that I will do everything in my power to prevent it. For I believe that a conspiracy does exist, even though I have no proof of it. The facts stated by Mère Fouchon had already been ascer-

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tained by my agents. Charles Ribaut left a very large fortune; his daughter Anne is the only heir, her uncle has had absolute control of the estate for fifteen years. But in all of this there is nothing which resembles a conspiracy, even in the least degree. It is quite possible that he intends turning the whole fortune over to Briquet."

"What then will you do, Monsieur?" I questioned anxiously.

"There is only one thing to be done," he answered. "We will assume a bold front. We will act as though we held great forces in reserve. We will endeavor to frighten them. It is an old trick, but one which is often successful with the guilty. Let us hope it will be so in this case."

We were crossing the Pont au Change, and I looked out upon the river with eyes that saw nothing. I had thought success so certain, and now, it seemed, I might yet lose! I raised my eyes to find d'Argenson looking at me with a smile whose meaning I did not understand.

"M. le Moyne," he said, "I am going to ask you a question which you need not answer if you do not choose."

"What is it, Monsieur?" I asked.

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"It is concerning Mlle. Ribaut. I have reason to believe that you love her. Is it not so, Monsieur?"

"That is so, M. le Comte," I replied, and my hands were trembling.

"I am glad to hear it," he said, and fell into a reverie, smiling to himself. It was not until we stopped before the church that he spoke again.

"Here we are," he cried, "and with still ten minutes to spare. Come with me," and we left the carriage and entered the church. An old man met us at the door and cast an astonished glance at me.

"Are you the sacristan?" asked d'Argenson.

"Yes, Monsieur," answered the fellow.

"There is to be a wedding here at nine o'clock, is there not?"

"I do not know, Monsieur. There has already been one wedding here at eight o'clock."

My heart fell within me. Could it be that the hour had been changed?

"What were their names?" asked d'Argenson sharply.

"The man was named Brujon," answered the sacristan. "I do not remember the woman's name."

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I breathed again. We were still in time.

"Very well," said d'Argenson. "I will see the curé and find out about this other marriage."

"Pardon, Monsieur," protested the man, "but the curé is very busy."

"You will tell him," said d'Argenson grimly, "that the Comte d'Argenson, lieutenant of police, wishes to speak to him and at once."

The fellow's face turned livid and he bowed to the ground.

"Oh, M. d'Argenson," he stammered, "that is another matter. Follow me, Messieurs, and I will conduct you to the curé."

He led the way along a side aisle to the sacristy at the rear. He tapped at the door, and a voice bidding us enter, he opened it and ushered us in. The curé was sitting at a table writing.

"This is M. le Comte d'Argenson, M. le Curé," said the sacristan, and went out, closing the door after him.

The curé looked at us with alarmed and astonished eyes.

"This is an honor," he said, at last. "Will you not sit down, Messieurs?"

"M. le Curé," began d'Argenson abruptly, "you

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are to celebrate a marriage here at nine o'clock, are you not?"

"Yes, Monsieur. A M. Briquet and a niece of M. Ribaut. It was to have taken place a week ago, but was postponed by the illness of the bride."

"That is it. Well, M. le Curé, this wedding must not take place, since it is believed to be a conspiracy to defraud the girl."

"A conspiracy, Monsieur?" gasped the curé.

"Yes, a conspiracy. Will you require any further proof of it?"

"Not if I have your word, M. d'Argenson," answered the curé, readily.

D'Argenson hesitated a moment.

"M. le Curé," he said, at last, "I will tell you candidly that we have no absolute proof of this conspiracy. For myself I do not doubt that it exists. In any event, I will assume all responsibility in the matter."

The curé bowed.

"I will also assume full responsibility for anything that follows," added d'Argenson. "What I may ask you to do will be somewhat irregular, Monsieur, but, believe me, it will be just."

"M. d'Argenson's assurance is more than suffi-

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cient," and the curé bowed again. "His passion for justice is well known."

Who could think of opposing the Lieutenant of Police—this man who carried all before him? Certainly not the curé of a small church!

"I will tell you one thing more, Monsieur," he added. "This girl has not been ill—she has been imprisoned. She will come to the altar faint and trembling, not from illness, but from horror. We are here to save her. I do not wish the parties to be forewarned. We will challenge them at the altar. A great deal will depend upon the completeness of the surprise."

"Very well, Monsieur."

"Is there any place in which we could remain concealed?"

"You could pause behind the tapestry at the doorway, Monsieur. From there you could hear and see everything."

A tap at the door interrupted him and, at his bidding, the sacristan entered.

"A wedding-party waiting for you, Monsieur," he announced to the curé.

"Very well," said the latter, "I will be there in a moment." The sacristan withdrew and the curé

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donned his stole and surplice. "Now, follow me, Messieurs," and he led the way to the door opening into the church, before which hung a tapestry. "You will be concealed here," he said, and raising the tapestry, he entered the church and stood before the altar.

CHAPTER XVI

M. D'ARGENSON'S COUP

MY head was singing strangely as I stared out into the church, and a great trembling seized me, for I was faint from loss of sleep, of food, of blood—of everything, in a word, that makes life. I heard myself praying wildly to the Virgin, the building seemed to rock before my eyes—and then I felt a strong and kindly hand upon my shoulder.

"Be brave, M. le Moyne," said d'Argenson's voice. "Be strong. You have need of your strength now, if ever."

The voice—the clasp of the hand—nerved and steadied me. I felt that with this man beside me I could vanquish fate itself.

Once more I looked out into the church. I saw the acolyte arrange the altar-cloth and light the candles. Then the priest raised his hand, and the wedding-party advanced from the vestibule. It consisted only of Nanette, her uncle, and the hideous Briquet. The men held the girl between them and were almost carrying her. Her face was

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white as death, and she turned her eyes appealingly from one to the other, but saw only ferocity in those two savage countenances. At last they were at the altar-rail, and she dropped to her knees and buried her face in her hands. I knew that she was praying.

"M. le Curé," said Ribaut, "in case the bride cannot answer, her legal guardian is permitted to answer for her, is he not?"

"Yes, M. Ribaut," replied the curé in a low voice, "that is permitted."

"Very well, Monsieur, proceed," and the men dropped to their knees beside the girl.

I could see her form shaken with sobs.

"Oh, come," I whispered to d'Argenson, "hasten, Monsieur. This is more than I can bear."

"It will be but a moment longer," and he pressed my hand.

"Is there any one here present," asked the priest, "who knows of any reason why these two should not be man and wife?"

D'Argenson put the tapestry back and advanced slowly to the altar-rail. Ribaut and Briquet saw him, and the eyes of the latter dilated with terror, for he had seen d'Argenson as you know, and knew

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him now. Nanette did not raise her head, but continued sobbing softly. Plainly she had abandoned hope.

"I forbid the marriage, M. le Curé," said d'Argenson.

As she heard these words, Nanette raised her head with a start. She saw d'Argenson standing there. She fixed her eyes on his and what she read there seemed to reassure her, for she smiled and her weeping ceased.

Ribaut was on his feet in an instant, but Briquet remained kneeling, seemingly paralyzed by d'Argenson's words. His mouth was working convulsively and his face was livid.

"Who is this fellow?" asked Ribaut, looking from d'Argenson to the priest, purple with rage.

"I forbid the marriage," continued d'Argenson, before the priest could answer, "because it is a conspiracy between these two men to defraud Anne Ribaut of her property."

"It is a lie!" screamed Ribaut, and he shook his fist in his accuser's face. D'Argenson merely looked at him and smiled. He read guilt in his eyes.

"Come, M. Ribaut," he said coolly, "how about



"I forbid the marriage"

1. The first part of the document is a list of names and addresses of the members of the committee.

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those ten thousand crowns you parted with this morning?"

Ribaut stared in astonishment, and his blood shot to his eyes, as he realized his danger.

"M. le Curé," he protested at last, with an effort at composure, "one does not believe the ranting of every madman who happens in from the street. Let him bring forward his proof of this ridiculous charge."

"I have my proof," said d'Argenson, with a calmness I was far from sharing. "Come forward, my friend," he added, turning towards the place where I stood.

I lifted the tapestry and stepped into the church. Ribaut and Briquet stared at me in amazement. Evidently they did not know me, but the eyes of love were keener.

"Pierre!" cried Nanette. "Oh, Pierre! And they told me you were dead!"

"Really, M. le Curé," sneered Ribaut, "one would say this was a theatre and not a church. What comedy is this? From what gutter did you drag that scoundrel?"

"You have a short memory, it seems, M. Ribaut," I retorted. "I did not think you would

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forget our last interview so quickly. I see that you still have the marks of it on your face."

He stared at me with eyes starting from his head.

"So," he murmured at last, "it is the lover!" and his eyes glittered with passion. "M. le Curé, you will not heed the ravings of such scoundrels?"

The curé smiled dryly.

"It appears you do not know this gentleman," said he, glancing at d'Argenson.

"No," snarled Ribaut, "nor do I wish to know him."

"You may be interested, nevertheless, went on the curé, "in knowing that it is M. le Comte d'Argenson, lieutenant of police."

"D'Argenson!" cried Ribaut, and I saw the blood struck from his face as by a blow. "D'Argenson! Very well," he continued after a moment, vainly trying to steady his voice, as he saw that the game was lost. "This wedding, then, will not take place. I yield. But I am still this girl's guardian, am I not, Monsieur?"

"Yes, you are still her guardian," assented d'Argenson.

"And she is still under my control?"

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"In all things save that of this marriage."

"Very well," cried Ribaut in a ferocious voice. "She will return home with me. Come, Mademoiselle," and he grasped her by the arm and turned away.

My brain was whirling as I saw Nanette look piteously at me. I started after them to commit I know not what act of violence, but d'Argenson waved me back.

"Stop a moment, M. Ribaut," he called. "There is only one thing which can release your niece from the duty of obedience to you. That is her marriage. You have lost your right to exact obedience in that."

He descended to Nanette's side and took her hands. He smiled into her eyes, and her face brightened as she looked at him.

"I repeat, Mademoiselle," he said, "that your marriage is the only thing which can make you independent of your uncle. It seems a pity that all these preparations should go for naught—that these candles should burn uselessly. Perhaps there is some one else present whom you would be willing to marry. The curé has assured me that he will overlook any little irregularity in the proceedings."

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His face was smiling and tender, all its ugliness vanished. I heard as in a dream.

"Oh, yes," cried Nanette. "'There is some one, Monsieur,'" and she turned and looked at me.

For a moment I did not understand.

"Me?" I stammered. "Me?"

"Yes, you!" cried d'Argenson gayly. "Come, M. le Moyne, wake up!"

A mist seemed to fall from before me, and I saw Nanette gazing at me with eyes wet with tears and lips quivering with tenderness.

"My darling!" I cried. "My life!" and I stretched wide my arms to receive her.

ENVOY

So the cottage at St. Cloud became a reality, after all, for with M. d'Argenson's willing help we choked Nanette's fortune from out her uncle's hungry maw, nor did he dare make much resistance. More punishment for him we did not seek—we were too happy to think of vengeance.

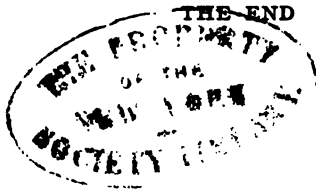
And here, too, came my sister—our sister, rather—the same sweet, strong, noble girl. The others dwell yet in the southland which they love; but, thank God, they no longer struggle hand to hand with want. We have visited them, Nanette and I, and how I joyed in showing her the places where my youth was spent—the river, the great wood, the little bed-room, whence I peeped out at my uncle's ruffians! Then back again to our home, here, at St. Cloud.

It is a pleasant place, nestling amid a grove of trees, with a vineyard at the right and the river gleaming in the distance. Sometimes, on summer afternoons, we set our table out of doors and dine with all this beauty close about us.

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And sometimes, too, our dearest friend puts the cares of his great office from him and comes alone to spend an hour with us. Need I say with what joy we welcome him? And I trust that in our love he finds some slight recompense for his great kindness to us.

In one corner of the little burial ground of the Théatins there is a grave which Nanette and I visit often. We love to sit beside it and talk over the days of our meeting. And as I tell for the hundredth time the story of my escape from Mère Fouchon, my wife rises with brimming eyes and kisses the little white shaft which bears the single word "Ninon."





1. The first part of the document is a list of names and titles.



